

Article

## Directing Paths Into Adulthood: Newly Arrived Students and the Intersection of Education and Migration Policy

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### Abstract

This article is centred on the tendency to align education for newly arrived students with migration policy. Drawing on an in-depth analysis of interviews with four adult migrant students, we aim to investigate how the participants' experiences of studying and how they imagine their future intersect with their immigration status. The interviews were conducted when they were first studying a language introduction programme, and then three years later. We focus on the participants' narratives about transitions within the education system and later into the labour market. Using Sara Ahmed's approach to the orientation of subjects in time and space, the analysis shows that all students expressed a desire to "be in line," meaning finishing their studies and finding employment. Students with temporary and conditional residence permits were directed towards specific vocational tracks and sectors of the labour market. Migrant students are a heterogeneous group and, based on the findings presented, we argue that immigration status constitutes a crucial part of this heterogeneity, influencing how students imagine their future in a new society.

### Keywords

education and migration policy; immigration status; language introduction programmes; migrant students; Sweden; the Upper Secondary School Act

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

This article looks at the intersection of education and migration policy through the lens of migrant students' narratives of their learning experiences. Since 2016, Sweden has moved towards more restrictive migration policies (Elsrud et al., 2021), characterized by hastily implemented laws aimed at minimizing the number of asylum seekers, stricter demands put on migrants to be considered integrated into the country of reception, and an increased tendency to align education for migrants with migration policies (for similar tendencies in the UK see Khan, 2019; Simpson, 2019). These policy changes

have had significant implications in the lives of newly arrived students, in the form of stress and uncertainty caused by a long asylum process and temporary and conditional residence permits. This article directs attention to newly arrived students' paths into adulthood and their hopes for the future during these turbulent times.

Empirically, the article draws on interviews with newly arrived students conducted on two separate occasions: when they were first enrolled in a language introduction programme (LIP) in upper secondary school, and then three years later. We examine migrant students' narratives about their learning experiences as well as their educational and occupational choices for the future.

LIPs prepare newly arrived students in their upper teens (between 16 and 19 years old) for studies at the upper secondary level. To become eligible for a national programme in upper secondary school, students need to pass a number of required subjects before they turn 20. For many students, this is a challenging task and a large proportion do not manage to meet the requirements (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018). The students constitute a diverse group in terms of educational, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. In 2017, 77% of students enrolled in LIPs were male (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018). Since then, as the number of students in such programmes has declined, the gender distribution has become more equal (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2021).

Previous studies on LIPs have mainly focused on students' social inclusion and experiences in studying introduction programmes, on the organizational structure of LIPs, and literacy education (e.g., Beach & Dovemark, 2019; Bunar & Juvonen, 2022; Hagström, 2018; Nuottaniemi, 2023; Winlund, 2021). There is scant research on what happens after completing a LIP or students' experiences of the transition to work. Other studies in related fields (e.g., Bernhardt et al., 2006; Liu & Guo, 2022) stress that navigating the complex path of transition from education to work is crucial for social inclusion. Liu and Guo (2022) argue that migrant students' experiences of their transition are shaped by intersectional barriers such as gender and social class, relegating them to socially marginalized positions. In political discourse, migrant students are often positioned as a "solution" to specific needs in the labour market (e.g., Nuottaniemi, 2023). Our aim in this article is to analyze how immigration status affects migrant students' educational experiences and vocational choices. Drawing on Ahmed (2006a, 2006b), we analyze how migrant students' paths into adulthood are directed in relation to their immigration status—that is, to what extent their stay in Sweden is conditioned.

## 2. A Turbulent Time

In 2015, approximately 160,000 asylum seekers arrived in Sweden, primarily from Syria and Afghanistan. They were first met with acts of solidarity in the form of initiatives by the state and civil society organizations (Elsrud et al., 2021), but by the end of 2015, Sweden had closed its borders. A temporary new law was implemented that marked a distinctive shift in Swedish migration policy (Elsrud et al., 2021; Milani et al., 2021). Temporary residence permits became the rule, the grounds on which to grant asylum were limited, and family reunification was restricted and conditioned by housing and income requirements in the urgently implemented legislation (Ministry of Justice, 2016). Whether asylum seekers had filed their application before or after 24 November 2015 became decisive for whether their application would be assessed with respect to the previous (more generous)

migration policy or the new (more restrictive) law. The restrictive "temporary law" has now become permanent.

Between 2015 and 2019, around 100,000 children under 18 applied for asylum, approximately 40% of whom were unaccompanied minors (Bunar & Juvonen, 2022). The implementation of restrictive migration policies was followed by a discussion of how to determine which groups required exceptions. The Upper Secondary School Act (Sw. *gymnasielagen*), introduced in 2017 and supplemented in 2018, is one such example. Despite its name, this was not an act in its own right but consisted of paragraphs from temporary law 2016:752 (Ministry of Justice, 2016), providing a group of migrant students with an opportunity to stay in Sweden while finishing their studies (paragraph 16 f §, added to Law 2016:752 in 2018, is often called the "new Upper Secondary School Act"; this article uses the complete denomination "Upper Secondary School Act" to refer to this and other paragraphs granting migrant students temporary residence permits for studying at upper secondary level as well as to the law replacing these paragraphs when the temporary law expired).

Under its provisions, migrants studying in introductory programmes or at upper secondary level in upper secondary school or in adult education were given a temporary residence permit but needed to prove that they were active students by sending their study plans and grades to the Swedish Migration Agency. According to the Upper Secondary School Act from 2018, conditions for eligibility included that a migrant applied for asylum on 24 November 2015 or before that date, was registered as an unaccompanied minor, waited at least 15 months before receiving their first rejection, and reached the age of 18 by that point. Approximately 9,000 students were encompassed by the Upper Secondary School Act (Eriksson, 2020). After finishing their studies at upper secondary level these migrant students could apply for a permanent residence permit if they could prove at least two years' permanent or fixed-term employment and were financially self-supporting six months after graduating. The Upper Secondary School Act was implemented after a heated debate and was heavily criticized for its lack of transparency and for being hastily passed (Eriksson, 2020). The non-transparent nature of the act had consequences for those involved and it was subject to inconsistent interpretation by the migration courts (Roos, 2021). When the temporary law expired, its provisions were transferred over to a new act, also called the Upper Secondary School Act, that is expected to be phased out between 2023 and 2025 (Swedish Migration Agency, 2023).

Taken as a whole, the Upper Secondary School Act provided students with a chance to stay in the country, yet at the same time made it restrictive, arbitrary, and conditional. Another consequence was that the law shifted focus from a group of young asylum seekers' protection needs to their educational achievements (Roos, 2021).

### 3. Theoretical Framework

To analyze the students' narrated experiences, we draw on Ahmed's (2006a, 2006b, 2010a) phenomenological understanding of how bodies and subjects are oriented in time and space. As Ahmed (2006a, p. 3) maintains, orientations "shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance, as well as 'who' or 'what' we direct our energy and attention toward." Understood in such terms, migration is about direction, involving both disorientation and reorientation. Reorientation can be described as a "meaning-seeking process and as a site for change" (Wara & Munkejord, 2018, p. 13), shaped by the interplay between specific migrant bodies and the conditions in a given social and geographical space. Migration illustrates the way bodies arrive and get directed "as a condition of arrival" (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 10). Migrant students have quite different conditions of arrival, depending, *inter alia*, on their immigration status and educational and cultural backgrounds. Some students have migrated with families, others as unaccompanied minors. These varying conditions affect how students are oriented in spaces already socially arranged. Orientations have an impact on how bodies act and how certain objects appear within reach, towards which subjects direct their attention (Ahmed, 2006b). In other words, some directions seem more feasible than others. Following orientations based on established norms and conventions means, to adopt Ahmed's terminology, "being in line."

School is an institution that serves as an orientation device pointing out certain directions (Ahmed, 2010a; Hagström, 2018). Educational institutions are oriented towards the future, providing students with possibilities and occupational alternatives. For newly arrived students in their upper teens, the school can be seen as an important reorientation device in a new environment (Hagström, 2018). In the case of students enrolled in LIPs, becoming eligible for a national programme in upper secondary school and following a path towards a school diploma corresponds to being in line, and this is often a priority for them (Hagström, 2018; Nuottaniemi, 2023; Sharif, 2017). Drawing on Ahmed's work, Hagström (2018) describes LIPs both as an orientational line directed towards the future and as a separate temporal and spatial line (e.g., studying in separate buildings from Swedish peers). Education is often presented and perceived as the only path forwards, making it difficult for students who do not manage to follow the line (either by not passing the required subjects or having their asylum claim rejected) to see other possible lines (Hagström, 2018). In addition, the educational line is conditioned for newly arrived migrant students by the acquisition of a linguistic repertoire in Swedish that is recognized and valued by school assessment practices. Migrant students often express their willingness to learn Swedish but are constrained by not having access to Swedish-speaking social spaces either in LIPs or society

at large (Nuottaniemi, 2023). In this vein, newly arrived migrant students can experience a sense of being physically in a space that is not perceived as fully available to them (Ahmed, 2010a; Nuottaniemi, 2023).

Orientations thus simultaneously have a spatial and a temporal dimension. They relate to the present as well as point to the future. At the same time, orientations are also about directions already taken (Ahmed, 2010b). What is more, being in line requires work that takes both time and energy (Ahmed, 2006a). The temporal aspect of being oriented is, in turn, part of an affective economy. According to Ahmed, affect is not merely a psychological phenomenon, but also a social one. From this perspective, emotions are not just something located "within" an individual, but rather mediate the relationship "between the individual and the collective" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 119). Hence, the narration of individually lived emotional experiences is also about social dimensions. For many students, LIPs are lived as a delay in relation to a desired line. For some students who do not pass the required subjects, or who turn 20 while still enrolled in a LIP, the educational site may also be experienced as a hindrance. For those who experience being delayed or stopped, there is quite a negative affective impact (Ahmed, 2006a). When bodies are stopped, inequalities structuring people's movements that linger in the background become visible. In this study, we specifically investigate how immigration status constitutes an important aspect of the students' conditions of arrival (Ahmed, 2006a) and how it intersects with the migrant students' orientations and learning experiences.

### 4. Method and Empirical Data

In this study, migrant students were interviewed on two occasions, in 2018 and 2021. The interviews focused on the students' backgrounds and experiences of studying, their work and life in Sweden, as well as their plans for the future. On the first occasion, we interviewed 74 students enrolled in LIPs, in five different schools. Three years later, we conducted 11 in-depth follow-up interviews. Much of the contact information provided to us in 2018 was no longer in use in 2021. Our second data collection is thus biased in the sense that those who were willing to participate were, to a large extent, those who had been able to stay in Sweden. The interviews were conducted in Swedish and lasted around 30–60 minutes. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and the (translated) quotations used in this study have been adjusted for the sake of readability. A significant difference between interviews 1 and 2 was the participants' proficiency in Swedish. Since they had developed their Swedish, the second round of interviews was generally both longer and more elaborated. The research project this article is based on has received ethical approval from the regional ethical board at Linköping University (Ref. 2017/280–31). Participants gave their consent to participate after having been informed about the aims of

the study and how the research material would be used. All personal data have been pseudonymized.

The analysis was conducted in the following way. First, an initial qualitative thematic data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of all interviews was carried out. The coding was inductive and the salient themes that emerged were: experiences of studying and transitions from LIPs, involuntary delays, educational and vocational choices, studying under uncertainty and stress, struggles involving periods of hopelessness, and desires to become included by means of completing education and finding an occupation. In the final step, Ahmed's (2006a, 2006b) framework was applied to approach students' narratives about their paths and how they make sense of their present location in Sweden in relation to the past as well as the future. In all steps, both interviews with each participant were analyzed in relation to each other to identify continuities as well as changes over time regarding past, present, and future narratives. In the analysis, we approach narratives as a mode of thought where subjects ascribe meaning to their experiences in time and place (Eastmond, 2007). Importantly, we understand narratives given in interviews as a meaning-making activity, not only reflecting participants' experiences but also constructing them. From this perspective, "past experience is always remembered and interpreted in the light of the present as well as by the way that the future is imagined" (Eastmond, 2007, p. 249). Interviews are an interactional achievement, where both researcher and participant are part of a co-construction of meaning (Talmy, 2011). This also means that participants' experience of the interview situation itself, including the researchers conducting the interviews, may have an impact on how they tell their stories.

To highlight contextualized individual trajectories in some detail, we present the findings based on individual narratives rather than according to recurrent themes.

We have selected four participants (Table 1) whose narratives reflect patterns in the larger data and that exemplify different paths formed in relation to varying immigration status.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Parin's Story: A Crooked Road Through Adversity and Headwinds

When we met Parin for the first time he was 19 years old. He had arrived from Afghanistan two years before as an unaccompanied minor. He told us that he did not have a family in his home country and that he now lived with a Swedish family. In Afghanistan, he went to school for nine years. At our first encounter, he was in his second year of a LIP and said that he was enjoying it. At the same time, he expressed feelings of hopelessness. He had received a third decisive rejection of his asylum application. Further, he had recently signed a declaration of acceptance of deportation.

The day before we met Parin, he had received his deportation date. He decided not to share this information with his teachers and friends since "they cannot help me and they will just be sad. There is not so much left. There are only two weeks left." As he waited for the days to pass, Parin hoped for a miracle to happen. He seemed to have a clear vision of the future he imagined for himself: "to continue high school, to get an education, find a job, work, and enter into society." After he completed the LIP, he wanted to enroll in a building and construction programme that, according to him, did not demand too much of him in terms of the subjects he found difficult:

There [the building and construction programme] you do not need so much math or physics and

**Table 1.** The four participants focused on in this study.

| Name     | Country of origin                         | Age at the time of interview 1 | Time in Sweden during interview 1 | Immigration status at the time of interview 1  | Immigration status at the time of interview 2 |
|----------|---|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| Parin    | Afghanistan                               | 19                             | 2 ½ years                         | Had signed a declaration of acceptance of deportation, after his claim for asylum had been rejected three times      | Temporary residence permit                    |
| Sarwar   | Afghanistan, but moved to Iran as a child | 18                             | 2 years                           | Had a temporary residence permit that expired when he turned 18 and had applied for a new temporary residence permit | Temporary residence permit                    |
| Sana     | Syria                                     | 18                             | 3 years                           | Had a permanent residence permit   | Swedish citizenship                           |
| Giuliana | Spain                                     | 17                             | 4 years                           | Swedish citizen from birth   | Swedish citizen from birth                    |

chemistry. It was hard for me. There you do not need so much language to speak. If you want to become, for example, a doctor or a lawyer and you study law, it is too hard for us, refugees. For me, the easiest is construction, as I have chosen.

Three years later, Parin was still living in Sweden, working at a large industrial company as a machine operator, having enrolled in an industrial programme at his upper secondary school after completing his LIP. He explained that he had been encouraged to choose the industrial programme over building and construction as that would make it easier to get a job.

Reflecting on the preceding years, Parin described living under the uncertainty of not knowing whether he was entitled to stay in the country. We asked him if he thought it would have made any difference if he had known, when he was studying in the LIP, that he would be able to stay in Sweden:

Yes, very much. Very much. Then maybe I could have the life that I have now, a permanent job and everything. I could have had it two years ago....It depends on you, how you feel. Sometimes you are sad, sometimes you are tired. Sometimes you feel okay and want to go to school. You cannot decide for yourself.

Looking back at the time he received the third decisive rejection of his asylum application, Parin told us that he was about to give up. He had no energy left for school. In this situation, the support of a friend was pivotal. This friend told him about a new law that might provide the opportunities he needed, stressing that he should keep fighting:

Well, I have had three rejections. I have also signed the deportation decision that I would go back. They sent me to the embassy, I got a paper that was like a passport, you can go back and everything. I was so sick of everything, I just couldn't go to school and learn Swedish. Then a friend, who I had talked to, said to me: "You have to think positive and go to school and learn Swedish. There are new rules coming and then you will be able to stay in Sweden." This was at the last minute and I decided: "Okay, this is the last chance. I have to try." This was my second year [at the LIP]. I started to work really hard and I passed all the subjects.

The new law was the Upper Secondary School Act that had recently been implemented. It provided Parin with a sense of hope, not only to continue but also to complete his studies in the LIP and to stay in the country. He told us that these studies counted for a great deal, providing him with the basic language skills needed to manage everyday life in Sweden.

Parin described the first three months in his upper secondary school as tough: "Imagine that you are sitting

in a classroom with 25–30 students, all Swedes, and it is just you who is an immigrant...everybody understands except you and you do not want to raise your hand to say 'I do not get it.'" Parin talked to a teacher and they agreed to meet regularly to discuss the issues Parin had in mind. In upper secondary school, there were opportunities for work-based learning at local industries, where he also worked during summer breaks and later found employment. When we met for the second time, he reflected on his life and years in Sweden: "Sometimes I think I've had my share of bad luck in life, but when I really think about it, I've met great people the whole time, in school, everywhere. Then I say: 'No, I have had a lot of luck.'"

At the time of our second encounter, Parin had recently applied for a permanent residence permit. He hoped to continue studying and eventually become a train driver.

## 5.2. Sarwar's Story: Leaving the Roaring Lion Behind

Sarwar was born in Afghanistan but moved to Iran at a young age, together with his family. There he attended a community-run school for Afghan children for eight years before coming to Sweden in 2015 as an unaccompanied minor. When we met him for the first time, he was 18 years old and living by himself. His temporary residence permit had just expired and he was still waiting for it to be renewed. Talking about his future, Sarwar said his main goal was to become eligible for a national programme in an upper secondary school, specifically in a building and construction programme. At the same time, he described the uncertainty of his life situation as difficult, affecting his ability to imagine the future: "It's hard to see the future when I don't know if I will be here or not."

When we met Sarwar for the second time, he was living with a Swedish family, having received a temporary residence permit, and was now striving to receive a permanent one. He gave great credit to the Swedish family for the progress he had made in the Swedish language as well as for his general well-being. When asked to describe how living with a Swedish family had been important to him, he said:

It means a great deal to me....In a way they have helped me a lot with the language....How should I say? I have learnt Swedish in a good way. In a way that they are here, how can I say....It is so important for a human being to feel...to feel that people like me, and that I mean something to someone.

However, reflecting on the LIP, he recalled it as marked by uncertainty and stress caused by not knowing whether he would be entitled to stay in the country. That made it hard to keep faith and motivation to engage in his studies. He described this experience as both an individual and a collective one, shared by many of his friends:

You are so stressed the whole time. I have a friend who used to say: “I understand how much stress you are in the whole time.” It feels like you have one, how can I say, a lion behind you all the time, it hunts you. It is like....Sometimes, when it is hard in school, it is easy to give in, so [you] say or you think: “But I do not know if I can stay or not, then I just [don’t] give a damn.” You do not care for the task and [you] want to do something fun instead so I feel better....[There are] many who...many friends that say: “We do not know if we will stay in Sweden or not, so it is really hard to focus on school.”

When describing his experience in a LIP, Sarwar told us that his studies had been strongly affected by the Upper Secondary School Act and the conditions it entailed:

We talked with the teacher and said that we wanted to know if we would pass this semester or not, or if we have to study more. She couldn’t say as it was in the middle of the semester. We were sad and she saw that we were worried, we, the ones without residence permits. She comforted us and said: “But you have to keep struggling as you do, it is really good. I cannot say if you will make it until the semester is over, so you have to continue working like this and being as good as you are.”

When we met Sarwar for the second time, he was about to finish an electricity and energy programme and was happy to report that he had recently secured employment at a solar panels company. Like Parin, he had also changed his choice of education and future work. When we later asked him about his considerations when deciding which programme to study, he told us:

Yes, I thought a lot before I [chose], since the Migration Agency said that when you are finished with high school you need to find a job. Instantly, I thought that I have to pick a programme so I could find a job later on. And yes, that is the most important [thing] for me.

Sarwar thus described how his plans for the future had changed according to the requirements introduced by the Upper Secondary School Act. His main priority for the future was to finish his studies and then find a job as soon as possible. What kind of job and how it matched prior hopes for the future seemed to be of lower priority. In our second interview, Sarwar was happy with his job but did not think that he would cope with it for the rest of his working life, as he described it as hard work being on roofs most of the time. Therefore, he would like to continue studying and become an electrical engineer. Another dream is to write a book about his experiences and migration to Sweden.

### 5.3. Sana’s Story: Being in Between

Sana was born in Syria to a Palestinian family. She migrated to Sweden in 2015 together with her mother and siblings. Her father had settled in Sweden before their arrival but had not yet obtained a permanent residence permit. During their settlement process in Sweden, the family lived in various locations. Sana had to enroll in a LIP in three different schools. At the time of our first interview, she was 18 years old and had not yet obtained all the grades needed to be eligible for a national programme in upper secondary school. Her childhood dream was to become a lawyer, but she had been told that that would be difficult to achieve and her plan was now to take the business and administration programme. In the future, she would like to become a social worker.

When we met Sana for the second time, she was about to finish her studies in the business and administration programme. She had a weekend job at a local amusement park. She failed English at her LIP, which meant that she had to retake a year and only study English for a few classes a week. “I cried all night when they told me this,” she said, as “I don’t want to lose a whole year because of this.” After a couple of months, she managed to find an upper secondary school that gave her dispensation to start a business and administration programme while completing English. In retrospect, she described her LIP in quite positive terms, as providing “a good foundation,” both in terms of being prepared for studies at upper secondary level and linguistically, to “dare to talk” in an “ordinary high school with Swedes.”

At the time of our first interview, Sana had obtained a permanent residence permit. Thus, during most of her study time, she knew that she was entitled to stay in Sweden. When we asked her to reflect on whether it made any difference to her learning situation knowing that she had a permanent residence permit, she told us:

If I were to stay, I would struggle more and more to prove to myself that I fit here in society, that I’m here, I do something, I’m not just here to live on social welfare or something that everybody thinks. I want to continue studying, so I can get a really good job that I like....Then, when I got my residence permit, I was so glad that I would be able to stay since I have so many friends that still do not know if they will stay or not. This affects them and they stop studying.

In Sana’s retrospective reflection, knowing that she would be able to stay in Sweden was described as strongly motivating her to prove “that I really fit in this society, I’m here to do something, I am not just here to live on social welfare or something that others think.” In this way, she confirmed that she really is in line with Swedish society, contributing to the common good by engaging in studies to get a job that she enjoys. At the same time, she positioned her own experience and hopes for the future in relation to friends

who did not know whether they would be granted asylum, destinies she found quite distressing. Her boyfriend was deported to France and two girls at her LIP were deported to Germany:

I thought about it all the time, if they would be given the chance to stay or not. I thought about it a lot. I was really sad, because there were many who would have deserved to stay, but they were not allowed. So it made me really sad.

At the time of our second encounter, Sana was just about to finish upper secondary school. She had managed to pass all the subjects needed to be eligible for university, and could thus imagine a future for herself in undergraduate study with hopes of realizing her dream of becoming a social worker.

#### 5.4. *Giuliana's Story: Continuity and Unawareness*

When we met Giuliana for the first time, she was 17 years old and had been in Sweden for four years. Her parents fled from Chile to Sweden, where they had lived for a long time. Giuliana was born in Sweden and is a Swedish citizen. However, moving with her mother to Spain when she was four years old meant that she forgot the Swedish language. Her father stayed in Sweden, and in seventh grade, her parents decided that it would be good for her to move back there. Family is very important to Giuliana and she spends a lot of time with hers. On arriving in Sweden, she started studying in an introductory class but was later transferred to a regular one. However, she did not pass her 9th-grade Swedish class. As a consequence, she had to start in a LIP instead of a national programme at the upper secondary school level. Further, she only had a couple of classes a week, since she had already passed most of the subjects taught in LIPs. In the first interview, Giuliana felt divided about her studies in a LIP. She described them as very rewarding, saying: "I've learned that it actually is fun to study," with teachers inspiring her. On the other hand, she felt different from the other students, as she was the only one who spoke Spanish. Further, girls were a minority in her class:

All of the others speak Arabic, and I don't understand, they only talk to each other and I just stand here: "Why don't you speak Swedish with me?" Things like that. And then there are mostly guys who go to [the name of the school], and some don't respect me, in some way.

Giuliana has been enrolled in LIPs at several schools and she is particularly critical of one school where the class was organized in a separate building from the rest of the regular classes. That made it difficult to make Swedish-speaking friends, which in turn became an obstacle to learning Swedish:

Those who studied at [my LIP] were in one building and those who went to normal school, so to speak, were in another building. That was not good. Because you could not get to know people who spoke Swedish.

At our first encounter, Giuliana was about to finish her LIP. She was very excited since she had applied for the arts programme in her upper secondary school and had just done an audition as a part of the admissions process.

When we met Giuliana three years later, she was in her last semester of the arts programme in upper secondary school and aiming to become a stage artist. She was quite happy with her educational choice, as she got to study theatre, singing, and acting, which she loved, together with subjects she needed for higher studies, such as maths. The choice also influenced her thoughts about the future since "this is something I really love....And now I realize that I might want to become a dance teacher in the future." She was living in the same city, with her family. When reflecting on her studies in the LIP, she still had mixed feelings. She did not feel at home as a female in a male-dominated class, but also due to the social climate among her classmates. When asked about having known, during her studies, that she was entitled to stay in Sweden permanently, she said:

I have actually never thought about it. Now when you say it, I have never thought about the fact that I always knew that I could stay. I knew that I would stay, so for me, I just had to learn Swedish....As you said, I was hundred percent sure that I should stay because I didn't want to go back to Spain either [laughter]. Well, yes. It affected me in the way that I felt that I have to, I have to, I have to. I must speak as well as possible because I know that I'm going to stay here.

However, despite knowing that she was entitled to stay in Sweden, she struggled with her self-esteem in relation to speaking Swedish and reaching out to Swedes. She was at that time planning her graduation, after which she wanted to save money so she would be able to go to the US and become an *au pair*. Then she wanted to go to university to become a subject teacher in history, religion, and English.

## 6. Discussion

Through the lens of newly arrived students' narrations of their lived experiences, this article sheds light on a turbulent time marked by conflicts and accelerated migration laws that resulted in arbitrary boundaries with profound consequences in individuals' lives (e.g., Elsrud & Lalander, 2021; Flubacher, 2021; Simpson, 2019). The students' narratives are marked by significant others, frictions, delays, and turning points. For Parin and Sarwar, the implementation of the Upper Secondary School Act was described as an important turning point in their lives in the new country, instilling a sense of hope in them

with the possibility of continuing to follow the line they had started. Although the experiences of LIPs vary, all students experienced it as an involuntary delay (cf. Beach & Dovemark, 2019; Hagström, 2018). Still, in retrospect, they appreciated the opportunity to learn basic Swedish that LIPs provided. All the students expressed a strong desire to be “in line,” become eligible for national programmes in their upper secondary schools, pursue studies at the higher education level, or find employment (cf. Hagström, 2018; Sharif, 2017). Nevertheless, staying “in line” has required hard work, associated in the narratives with hardship, prolonged stress, and periods of hopelessness. The transition from LIPs to a national programme in upper secondary school and, for some, to work was assigned great importance, both in terms of providing a sense of belonging and giving access to a Swedish-speaking context. In addition, for students impacted by the Upper Secondary School Act, employment emerged as a means of obtaining a permanent residence permit. However, as illustrated in Liu and Guo’s (2022) study, students need to navigate their path of transition between education and work where educational and vocational choices are shaped and governed by racialized as well as gendered practices.

How subjects are oriented in time and space relates to their different starting points (Ahmed, 2006a). At the time of our first encounters with the students, they were all enrolled in LIPs, yet facing different conditions of arrival in the country and their educational space, with different educational and linguistic backgrounds as well as access to social networks, a caring family, as well as varying immigration status (see also Bunar & Juvonen, 2022; Hagström, 2018; Winlund, 2021). In particular, immigration status seems to have a decisive impact on how an individual’s orientation is formed in the present, and into the future. For students whose asylum applications had received several rejections (such as Sarwar and Parin), the Upper Secondary School Act provided a second chance, instilling a sense of hope “that the lines we follow will take us somewhere” (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 18). This was in contrast to some of their peers, who were either deported or fled from Sweden to precarious life situations in other countries (Elsrud & Lalander, 2021). However, also verbalized along with the hope was the stress caused first by the uncertainty of not knowing whether one would be entitled to stay in the country or not, and then by prolonged uncertainty, as the second chance provided by the Upper Secondary School Act was highly conditional and performance-based. In the narratives, emotions are important in the students’ meaning-making and interpretation of their experiences. Affect works to align bodies and objects and is also part of how subjects create meaning in their location and relation to an imagined national community (Ahmed, 2004). Being deported or facing a threat of deportation can be understood as an extreme case of being stopped and forced in a new direction (cf. Ahmed, 2010a). Arguably, the stressful uncertainty under which the students had

previously lived provided a strong motivational effect for aligning themselves with the conditions set up by Upper Secondary School Act, since that provided them with a chance to stay in the country on a legal basis. Affect also works between subjects, binding them together (Ahmed, 2004). Sana’s narrative illustrates how the destiny of her friends who had been deported from the country continued to distress her. At the same time, the knowledge that not all of those deserving to stay in Sweden had been given a chance to do so instilled in her a sense of joy when she reflected on her own situation of having a permanent residence permit.

All migrant students in our study describe their affective work to be seen as a recognized member of a new country. For students like Parin and Sarwar, this struggle was strongly influenced by their temporary residence permits and prolonged periods of uncertainty. Axelsson et al. (2017) discuss how immigration policies can create “spatio-temporal waiting zones” that delay access to certain rights and a sense of security. Being in such “waiting zones” (e.g., waiting for a permanent residence permit), migrants can accept certain conditions and choices as part of a long-term project, even though these conditions may be quite precarious and the choices made are not in line with initial hopes for the future. Students’ actions in that present can thus be interpreted in the light of how they imagined their future. For those impacted by it, the Upper Secondary School Act became an “orientation device” (Ahmed, 2010b), directing the students into different specific educational as well as vocational paths. In this sense, orientations are not only about what is within reach for the individual but also what becomes significant. As illustrated in the participants’ narratives, their varying immigration statuses informed not only their learning experiences in the present, but also their way of imagining their future, and the extent to which they allowed themselves to dream or construe it by means of instrumental needs. “Doing things,” Ahmed (2006a, p. 109) maintains, “depends not so much on intrinsic capacity or even dispositions and habits, but on the ways in which the world is available as a space for action.” While Sarwar describes his choice of study programme by ascribing agency to the Migration Agency, Giuliana’s Swedish citizenship forms a materialized privilege, providing her with the right to stay in Sweden, so self-evident that it virtually disappears. For those whose priority was to become financially self-supporting as quickly as possible in order to qualify for a permanent residence permit, other dreams were put on hold, albeit still being present as possible opportunities in a more distant future. For these students, the Upper Secondary School Act served as a form of orientation device directing their attention to what appeared “near enough to be reached” in the imminent future (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 54), thus ultimately directing their paths into adulthood. The Upper Secondary School Act can be said to have a disciplinary function where migrant students are subjected to the Swedish labour market as well as to immigration policies



(cf. Anderson, 2010). In 2023, a landmark ruling from the Migration Court of Appeal made a stricter assessment of the requirements for obtaining a permanent residence permit. The arbitrary boundaries set up by the Upper Secondary School Act have thus continued to change and, for those concerned, breed a sense of uncertainty that continues to stretch out in time, forming the present as well as the future.

## 7. Conclusions

Education for newly arrived migrants is characterized by the diversity of the student group in terms of their cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds as well as their current life situations (Khalifa Alegefi & Hunt, 2022). We argue that immigration status is a key aspect in the students' different conditions of arrival (Ahmed, 2006a) in an educational space, affecting newly arrived migrant students' learning experiences, occupational choices, and conceptions of their future. From this perspective, students are oriented towards different institutional lines partly depending on their immigration status. Some students are less free than others in imagining their future.

The narratives related by the four migrant students presented in this article illustrate changes in individual life situations but also provide insight into wider changes taking place in contemporary Sweden. Education here is, like other parts of the welfare system, increasingly intertwined with a more restrictive migration policy, where migrants need to qualify for access to social rights (Elsrud et al., 2021; Milani et al., 2021). These ongoing changes are, in turn, part of wider policy transformations and a rise of nationalism taking shape in Sweden as well as in other countries (Khan, 2019; Simpson, 2019). To capture the dynamics of these changes, individual experiences as told in migrants' narratives of their lives are of great importance, not least over time.

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## Conflict of Interests

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