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EXPLORING PRACTICES OF CO-CREATION INVOLVING AND RELATED TO
HIGHLY SKILLED INTERNATIONALS

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the practices of co-creation in the context of enhancing employment for highly skilled internationals in Finland. Co-creation is an emerging paradigm in public administration. It involves active collaboration between public authorities and various stakeholders. Relying on a practice-based approach, we analyze multistakeholder workshops designed to address recruitment challenges faced by internationals in which authors of this article had dual roles of participants and observers. The research highlights the facilitated nature of these co-creation processes, the role of planned activities, and the dynamics of interaction among participants. In this paper, we showed how co-creation in the context of enhancing highly skilled internationals' employment was done through a facilitated process, where a diverse group was seeking for a consensus. With this paper, we contribute to the literature on public sector collaboration by offering a detailed account of the micro-level practices that enable co-creation. We emphasize the potential of co-creation to democratize problem-solving and foster power-sharing among diverse actors, thereby enhancing the public value produced through collaborative efforts. By examining the specific practices that constitute co-creation, we provide insights into how public sector co-creation processes can be effectively facilitated.

Key words: *co-creation, facilitation, practice, online workshop*

Introduction

The contemporary paradigm of public administration implies that stakeholders consider the public sector not only as a legal authority and a service provider but also as an arena for co-creation (Torfing et al., 2019). Co-creation has even been seen as a third mode of democracy supplementing representative and participatory democracy by Ansell, Sørensen and Torfing (2024). They identified co-creation to have two advantages over other the two modes. First, the ability to democratize creative problem-solving and, second, the potential for power-sharing between public and private actors and residents. Co-creation also builds a bridge between top-down administration and bottom-up activism.

In this paper, we study the practices of a multistakeholder co-creation process (Lepistö & Hytti, 2021) centered around improving the situation of recruitment of highly skilled internationals in Finland. Increased international mobility of students and workers requires a deeper understanding of the problems they face in the receiving countries' labour market, as well as better inclusion of internationals into policy-making processes that concern them directly. The involvement of international (migrant) stakeholders in public discussions, consultative processes, and decision-making processes has not yet been much discussed in the literature.

Co-creation in the public sector requires the dedication of public administration authorities and the active involvement of stakeholders in the process of collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Highly skilled internationals are in focal position when co-creating solutions to support their employment. Involvement of migrants in co-creation processes has been studied increasingly in recent years (e.g. Concilio et al., 2022, Filler et al., 2021), but public co-creation processes focusing on services targeted to highly skilled internationals are still rare. Language barriers, lack of ICT skills, and power and resource imbalances have been identified as obstacles of participation in public co-creation among migrant groups in general (Bergamaschi et al., 2021; Leino & Puumala, 2021; Ragnedda & Muschert 2013).

In addition to barriers of participation due to language and ICT skills, a common problem that the newcomers face is lack of knowledge about the service system in the new host country, a phenomenon described with the terms of information disjuncture (Lloyd et al., 2013) or lack of administrative literacy (Grönlund et al., 2007). At worst, a migrant participating in co-creation process may have a bundle of these disadvantages (Aaltonen, 2020), which calls for a good planning of the process to overcome them. As said, the knowledge on these issues is collected

mainly among low-skilled migrant communities or refugee populations, which may differ from work-based migrants with tertiary education. Our paper builds knowledge of co-creation processes involving highly skilled internationals.

Our research question is: How is co-creation done in and through practices in the context of enhancing highly skilled internationals' employment? The novelty value of this study lies in its practice-based approach. We bring new insights to multi-stakeholder co-creation by analysing the practices that constituted co-creation workshops organised in the context of enhancing highly skilled internationals' employment in Finland. We show how co-creation is done in practice and through certain practices. We are interested in what happens in co-creation *in practice* but also how reoccurring, but also emergent taken-for-granted practices *shape the co-creation process* that we study (Orlikowski, 2015). In this paper, our focus is on the bundle of interconnected practices (Schatzki, 2002) that make co-creation. We draw on practice theory (Schatzki 2002, Reckwitz 2002, Nicolini 2013, Gherardi 2018) to understand what actors concretely do, say, and feel during collaboration. We contribute to the literature on public sector co-creation by adding knowledge of the micro-level of co-creation. That is, we elucidate how co-creation takes place in and through practices.

Theoretical framework

Public sector co-creation

The level of stakeholder participation can be described as a spectrum of increasing impact on public decision making (IAP2, 2007). In the literature, authors discuss different modes of participation along the continuum such as informing, consulting, involving, collaborating and empowering (IAP2 2007; Nabatchi, 2012), and concrete ways of participation, e.g. deliberative mini-publics (Setälä, 2021), consultative processes (Köhler, 2011), or including the public in collaborative governing bodies, such as committees, boards, and planning commissions (Meléndez & Hoff, 2023). An important task of a collaborative process is to ensure that the voices of people from different backgrounds are heard and that their opinions and ideas are considered in the policy-making processes (Setälä, 2021; Meléndez & Hoff, 2023).

Torring et al. (2019, 802) define co-creation in the public sector as

“a process through which two or more public and private actors attempt to solve a shared problem, challenge, or task through a constructive exchange of different kinds of knowledge, resources, competences, and ideas that enhance the

production of public value in terms of visions, plans, policies, strategies, regulatory frameworks, or services, either through a continuous improvement of outputs or outcomes or through innovative step-changes that transform the understanding of the problem or task at hand and lead to new ways of solving it”.

As public sector seems to be gradually transforming from a legal authority and a service provider to an arena of co-creation also in Finland (Torfing et al., 2019; Tuurnas, 2015), there will be new institutional designs, new forms of public leadership, and a series of systemic changes including increased use of co-creation in public service design and production. Engaging citizens and other stakeholders into co-creation stems from: (a) fiscal austerity (motivating to new, less resource-intensive modes of problem-solving), (b) the complex nature of the problems (calling out for more collaborative approaches), and (c) the development of new information technologies (making the connecting with citizens easier) (Nambisan & Nambisan, 2013).

Public sector co-creation is expected to produce more impactful services, new service innovations and better customer satisfaction (Voorberg et al., 2015, Autio, Dahlander & Fredericksen, 2013). Participating in co-creation is predicted to increase social inclusion, which in the case of newcomers may increase the feeling of belonging (Leino & Puumala, 2021). Having international talents co-creating their own services can also increase the input legitimacy of public services, which means trust on expertise and representativeness in planning and implementation of services, and output legitimacy, which refers to the trust on the ability of services to solve the problems for which they are intended (Jäntti, Airaksinen & Haveri 2017, Connelly 2011). Collaboration has also important value in itself both politically and symbolically (Voorberg et al., 2015).

In practice, stakeholders to be invited to public sector co-creation are people who can be affected by the problem at hand, by the solution to the problem, by the delivery of the solution, or by the outcomes of the delivery. Relevant stakeholders may involve participants both from public and private sector, civil society and individual residents of some location. Coming together and creating new, innovative solutions stimulates mutual learning among participants through sharing knowledge and experiences of the topic.

Common nominators of ‘good’ co-creation processes are, among others, trust between participants and safe atmosphere, multi-actor approach and inclusivity, openness, willingness and ability of the participants to contribute, skillful management of expectations, as well as clarity and transparency in the roles of the participants (see Blomqvist-Kurki, Mursu & Rantakokko 2021; Nardelli & Broumels 2018).

Designing a co-creation process calls for careful planning. First, the scope and aim of the process needs to be clear and transparent to all (Lee et al., 2018; Ansell et al. 2024) to avoid unfounded expectations of the participants and potential disruption of trust when those expectations are not met. Second, the selection of participants to invite requires careful consideration. It is important to secure diversity in knowledge, differences in interests, and balanced distribution of power (Lee et al., 2018). In addition, the process should be open to new participants to avoid the evolvment of ‘old boys’ networks’, where all co-creation participants share similar values, knowledge and privileges (Ansell et al., 2024). Hence, transparency and inclusivity of the co-creation is essential both for the results and for the legitimacy of the process. Third, the events need to be planned, including the venues or platforms together with the activities that take place during the process (Lee et al., 2018).

Fourth, facilitation or coordination of the process needs to be well designed since in co-creation different sectors and actors with different organizational logics, values and aims come together and conflicts are always potential. The facilitator is pushing the process towards a goal and looking for synergies between participants. Facilitation is always situated and interactive; it is balancing between premediated plans and freedom of the participants. Facilitation of co-creation process has been called pluricentric (Pedersen et al., 2011).

Practice perspective on co-creation

Practice approach implies understanding “how things are done”. A practice is “the entanglement of humans, materialities, discourses, knowledges and any other relevant elements in the situated activity” (Gherardi, 2018: 35). Practices are situated, emerging in interaction within a community, and they keep up the community (Nicolini 2013, Reckwitz 2002). Therefore, elements of practices are material, mental, social and cultural in nature.

In co-creation practices three elements are intertwined: sayings (discursive-cognitive elements), doings (material-embodied elements), and beings (relational-affective elements) (Mosely,

Markauskaite & Wrigley, 2021). A skilful facilitator can in co-creation situation use those elements to orchestrate the process to the direction that serves the purpose of the session (Nicolini et al. 2003).

Practices of co-creation are routines that people bring with them to co-creation process. At the same time, they are situated and emerging through shared culture, movements, bodily experiences, affects, and material environment that co-creation participants encounter. The new collectively shared practices emerge and are being internalized by the process. Exploring practices implies asking what and how is said, what and how things are done, and how people behave together and towards the others (Mosely, Markauskaite & Wrigley, 2021). Co-creation practices can consist of “*activities in facilitated social interaction, suggesting that particularly, practical knowledge (knowing-how) – but theoretical and personal knowledge too – are needed when professionals facilitate interaction*” (Lepistö 2024, 49).

Methods

Research site: online workshops

In this paper, we utilise the data from a multistakeholder co-creation process that focused on enhancing recruitment of highly skilled internationals in Finland. The process was the first out of three co-creation processes organised by a research project to experiment with a new form of stakeholder collaboration as a potential means for public administration authorities to design and implement regulations and support services. The arena for co-creation was three online workshops, two hours each, conducted via Zoom, during which the digital platform Miro was used as an online whiteboard for collaboration. The first workshop focused on the participants getting to know each other and exchanging experiences, as well as understanding the status quo of the topic. The second workshop was used for imagining desired futures, whilst the third one focused on choosing a desirable vision for the future and finding ways to realise that vision.

15 participants took part in the co-creation process. All participants were chosen and personally invited by the research team. Some people were born in Finland, others outside Finland. The co-creation process brought together employers and employees, policymakers, representatives of recruitment and other support services, as well as researchers. Some participants have had personal experience of being internationals in Finland (experience-based expertise), while

others had knowledge-based expertise in the topic. All participants resided in Finland. The workshops were held in English.

Participant observation

In this study, we rely on practice-based ethnography that addresses the question of “what people actually do while working, organizing, innovating, and learning” (Gherardi, 2019). Ethnographic research implies “embodied knowing” and “the ability to resonate with, becoming/with, and the capacity for affective attunement”. The authors of this article participated in planning and implementing the co-creation process and had different roles in the workshops as both participants and observers (Tillmar, 2020). The first and third authors were fully engaged as participants of the co-creation process. They acted respectively as a facilitator of the process and a co-facilitator (primarily technical assistance in Zoom). After each workshop these authors wrote reflections on how the process went from their perspectives and what were the most remarkable moments. The second author acted as an observer and was present as a “silent face” with her video on in Zoom meetings. She observed the interactions and wrote immediate notes that concerned the dynamic of the process. The second author was also present in the breakout rooms and observed the dynamics of work in the small groups that was not video recorded. The co-creation process was planned jointly by the research project researchers. It is also worth mentioning that the second author of this paper is a cross-border migrant residing in Finland, i.e., she belongs to the group of people that was in the focus of the co-creation process.

Video recordings and other data

We used a version of video ethnography (Hindmarsh and Heath 2007) to collect data. Video recordings is a useful tool for collecting the data because “videos go beyond audio data by enabling the observation and study of bodily movements and social interactions as they happen” (Thompson & Illes 2021: 584). Also, videos allow to preserve and compare data in different projects and look at the same data from different analytical angles (Hindmarsh & Heath, 2007). Video recording of online meetings (in our case it was Zoom) usually do not require extra expenses. Before the participants have agreed to participate in the co-creation process and signed their consent forms, they were informed that all session will be recorded. Also, there was no need to memorize or to write down all details of conversation. The breakout room

sessions were not recorded and, therefore, the observer wrote more extensive notes on what was happening in the breakout rooms she joined.

Beside the video recordings of Zoom sessions and notes and reflections made by the researchers who participated in the workshops, our collected data consists of feedback surveys from the participants, materials produced by participants during the workshops mostly on the digital collaboration platform Miro, as well as documents (emails, tables, consent forms, Power Point presentations etc.) that were prepared before and after the workshop.

Data analysis

Our analysis began immediately after each workshop, as the authors stayed online after participants had left. We collectively reflected on how the workshop went and shared our personal experiences and emotions. After the workshop series ended, the authors went through recordings of the workshop sessions, recalled, and extracted the “interesting moments” experienced and observed during the workshop: the moments that we felt were pivotal to the process or otherwise meaningful. We wrote brief descriptions of the moments, including transcriptions of interactions, and noted the situation where the moment took place (f.ex. phase in the process, particular exercise etc.). Choices of what to focus on were not self-evident, since there are so many aspects and intertwined practices of co-creation process that we could concentrate on. Following the ideas of Orlikowski (2015), in order to recognize and study practices of co-creation, we needed to draw “boundaries around activities” and “structures to zoom in”. By making those choices we cut out some other activities. These choices have consequences to our result since “the brighter the light, the darker the shadow” (Orlikowski, 2015, 39). Thus, the preliminary analysis led us to planned and spontaneous facilitation of co-creation enacted by both researchers of the project and participants process as the most interesting and central topic in our data.

After this, a round of thematic analysis was conducted on video recordings and authors’ notes and reflections. We paid particular attention to a) how the different actors/stakeholders involved in the process were positioned and b) how the co-creation process was facilitated both by the facilitators and the participants, and what both parties did and said. As we proceeded with the analysis, some other episodes and details of the co-creation process caught our eye. Therefore, we decided to include the other practices that intersect with practices of facilitation and form altogether bundles of practices of co-creation. In other words, the analysis followed abductive

logic (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) whereby the preliminary understanding of the co-creation practices gave us some cue of the studied phenomenon but kept us open to being surprised by the data.

Findings

In the results, we show how co-creation is done in and through practices in the context of enhancing highly skilled internationals' employment.

Facilitated co-creation

Interaction between participants of the co-creation process took place within a planned and facilitated setting. The project group that initiated the co-creation process planned a process that the participants would go through in the three two-hour online meetings. There was a named lead facilitator, who wrote a script for each workshop, detailing the contents and activities and their timings. She also prepared a virtual whiteboard (Miro) to be used for collaborative working during the workshops. Different tasks were added there in a processual manner (see Figure 1). Some pre-existing methods were applied as activities, such as “backcasting”¹ and writing visions for the future. The facilitator also prepared tailor-made tasks on the Miro board, such as a table for sharing thoughts and experiences.

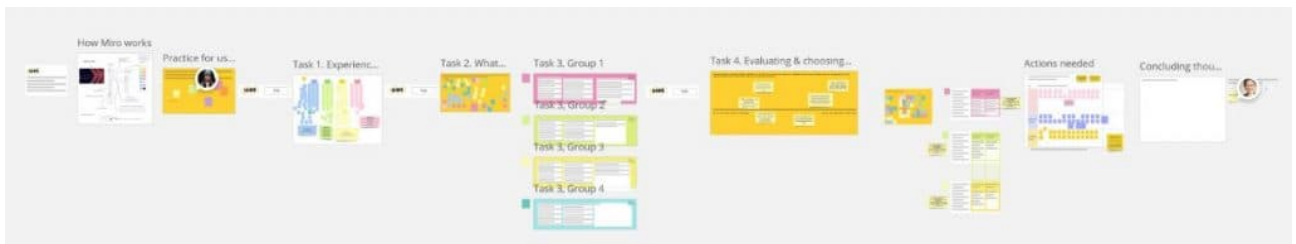


Figure 1 Virtual whiteboard used for collaboration

The workshops were conducted online via Zoom. Different modes of engagement were used, such as listening, talking in the main session, talking in small groups in breakout rooms and working on tasks given by the facilitator, writing in Miro and Zoom chat, and moving post-it notes around in Miro. Hands and fingers were also used to display opinions or experiences during check-in and check-out sessions at the beginning and end of each workshop. The facilitators controlled who was assigned to which breakout room. The main facilitator oversaw leading the group through the planned process and the co-facilitator oversaw technical assistance. Since the

¹ The term “backcasting” was coined by Robinson (1982) to describe a policy analysis approach within the field of energy consumption and it is applied in future studies to understand how desirable futures can be created (Bibri, 2018)

process and activities were pre-planned and the co-creation process was time-constricted (3 x 2 hours), the participants had low autonomy over *how* the group worked.

The facilitator positioned herself as a presumably neutral actor who oversees the group going through the co-creation process and the co-facilitator as a technical aid:

I'm going to be your facilitator throughout this process. So basically I will guide us through working together and through this co-creation and with me [the co-facilitator] as my co-facilitator. So if you have any problems, Zoom kicks you out or whatever things don't work, you can ask her for help.

The facilitator orchestrated the three workshops, from welcoming the participants as they entered the virtual meeting, to presenting the aims of the process and each workshop, to instructing what the participants were expected to do at a given time. The participants mostly did not challenge or negotiate the activities proposed by the facilitator. Sometimes they asked clarifying questions to make sure they understood what is expected of them.

Even though the participants didn't really contest the process or task given by the facilitator, they had the autonomy to choose *how* they did the task and even choose to use time in breakout sessions for something other than instructed:

Vilma: And then once we got to this part, we didn't go through the whole of these questions list.

As the central idea of the first workshop was to get to know each other, the facilitator even celebrated that participants had a free discussion instead of sticking to the plan:

Alvar: I must say that I don't think we actually managed to talk a lot about those two background that we already got the conversation very well going... And we already decided that we're gonna hook up perhaps even after this meeting and see how we can mutually beneficial for each other. So, I guess this is what networking all about is.

Facilitator: I'm very happy you skipped those questions but had conversation instead, I think that sounds awesome.

Whilst the facilitator was in charge of moving the process forwards, the participants also facilitated the process. For example, the participants took charge of pushing the discussion forward and clarifying the problem to be tackled or even challenging what was to be done next:

Facilitator: Jussi, you had a question and I assume a comment regarding this now?

Jussi: Yeah, just kind of, I was thinking that to make employing international talent easier. So I - do we see that it's difficult now or is it, can one just hire one? So is it, is it kind of just kind of trying to clarify maybe and stop me [facilitator] if I'm

advancing too much but is it like difficult? Well you can just hire one, but is it like - if you get my point. So is it more about the kind of attitudes or kind of willingness or do we see that we have kind of obstacles of hiring international talents? Just kind of trying to understand what to make it easier, like how? Or to make what easier exactly actually?

Facilitator: Thank you Jussi so much for asking that because next I was gonna ask whether this is whether this needs some clarification [laughs]. So perfect. Thank you so much. Yeah. What do you all agree?

This company representative's question led the participants to define the challenges better. Whilst the participants were negotiating what the core of the problem was, the facilitator tried to simultaneously summarize the key points each speaker said and wrote them as bullet points on a sticky note in Miro under the selected vision. By having this conversation, the participants again facilitated the process. As the facilitator noted:

I think actually, for example, what some of the things you're bringing up here are actually the kind of things we're gonna, I'm hoping that you will bring up also in the next exercise.

Whilst she was saying this, a few participants still had their virtual hands up.

Facilitator: Then, Jussi and Ville. And then I think we should move on. If after that we are OK with this vision, we should move on to the next task because you're already partially doing it.

Here, the facilitator was trying to move the *process* forward, and acknowledged that the participants are already doing partly what is expected in the next phase. However, the participants were keeping the conversation in the *content* and negotiating the issues the whole process is trying to solve.

The co-creation studied was done within a strict time limit of three two-hour workshops. The limited amount of time was present in the co-creation both in speech and materiality. When the participants went to breakout rooms, they could see a timer that showed how much time they had left there. When the time ended, Zoom automatically moved them back to the main session, which abruptly ended conversations:

Facilitator: Sorry to always be the ones breaking up amazing conversations.

Aivar: Yeah, we were just getting started [laughs].

Bella: Yeah, she's running.

Facilitator: Now you can, I'm not stopping the conversations, but I'm bringing everyone to the same conversation.

The facilitator had estimated before each workshop how long each task or section would take. During the workshops, she kept track of time and constantly evaluated and modified the original plan to accommodate for how the group worked. The participants did not see the plan that detailed the use of time, and the facilitator did not tell them whether they were behind time or

not. The facilitator just told them how much time they had in a breakout room session, for an individual task, or for breaks.

To make sure the group would be able to somewhat go through each workshops' agenda, the facilitator tried to ask the participants to share their group work quickly:

Facilitator: Quite short presentations like max 3 minutes, so we all get the gist of your future.

When the facilitator perceived that a discussion would prolong, she asked speakers to finish up quickly:

Facilitator: Then quick comments from Nora and Jussi, and then we will start building the future.

Nora: OK, I will try to be really quick, but I have a lot to say.

This restricted how the participants could contribute to the conversation. However, in the main session a handful of participants dominated the conversation and took more turns to speak than others, so restricting their time meant giving more time for tasks that could enable the others to be engaged in different ways.

At times, the conversation in the main session took longer than the facilitator had expected, and participants kept raising their hands to signify they would like to contribute to the conversation. The facilitator then vocalized that after the next speech turns, it would be time to move on – or even on occasion decided *not* to give a turn to a participant who had had their hand up for the sake of moving the process forward:

Facilitator: Farah, I kindly ask you to write your comment on the chat to make sure that we have time for the working together that we're going to move on to.

The participants noted the lack of time when sharing results from small group work:

Vilma: I think we just ran out of time. We had a very good discussion in our group, but yeah, we didn't make it to all the way to 3 positive decision drivers, but it was a good discussion.

Facilitator: That's totally OK and I think that good discussion is better than many things written. Right. I think everyone is back. Um, I'm sorry. We always have to be the bad guys who close the rooms way too early. It's always the case.

Even though the facilitator felt pressed with time and stressed about the group running behind, she tried to put the participants at ease by emphasizing that it is alright that they did not reach the goals of the task they had.

When going through results of small group work, the facilitator assigned a turn for each. The participants in turn facilitated speaking turns within their group:

Taina: Idris, would you like to start or Minna? You had so good ideas.

Idris: Uh, I now have to collect my thoughts again. Yes..[laughs] [--] So yes, someone else can say the rest, please.

Diverse, but consensus-seeking group

The project group aimed to have a co-creation process focused on the employment of highly skilled internationals in Finland that would include a diverse range of stakeholders related to the topic. Lee et al. (2017) state that in designing and implementing a co-creation process the choices regarding participants should be made considering “diversity in knowledge”, “differences in interests”, and “distribution of power”. To ensure the diversity of expertise, the project group invited people who represented different public institutions in charge of unemployment issues, the business sector, as well as recruitment agencies. Also, an important part of the process was to ensure the participation of internationals, i.e. people with background other than Finnish, who were affected by or/and were interested in discussing and solving problems related to the recruitment of international talents. In other words, some participants were invited as representatives of organizations that were involved in solving the problems related to unemployment, while others were invited as international talents currently residing in Finland.

Invited participants were chosen by the research project that initiated the process and personally contacted by the researchers. Hence, the process was a closed process by nature.

During the first workshop, the participants were asked to introduce themselves and the multitude of roles or points of view they might hold vis-à-vis recruitment of highly skilled internationals:

Facilitator: Because I know that ... many of you have multiple different kinds of roles. So, share what are all the different points of views? Is it so that you are a service provider or working for an association or an international yourself and have experience of finding a job or being an entrepreneur or an employer?

The participants themselves decided how to present themselves and their stakeholder role. Some revealed themselves as people with foreign background and a few as returning Finns who had been living several years outside Finland. At least half of the participants had an “international background.” Those who had been invited to the workshop as “internationals” did not present themselves as just internationals, but also brought out their professional roles and statuses, including being “a coach for international students”, being “an international

activist”, or “an entrepreneur in recruitment services”. Two internationals shared that they were unemployed at the time when the workshop was held.

The facilitator tried to create a sense of empathy and shared experience by asking participants to raise their hands if they ever lived in a country outside the country they were born in as part of a “check-in” session of the last workshop. This question was included to see if the participants could relate to the experiences of people moving to Finland. All except one participant (out of the ones who had turned on their camera) raised their hands to show that they’ve lived in another country.

Whilst the participants were invited to the co-creation process due to a certain stakeholder position, they were assumed to hold, during the workshops these stakeholder positions weren’t emphasized. Rather, the facilitator encouraged participants to be present as *humans* and share as much or little of their or their organization’s experience they want:

“... when you're sharing something, we don't really expect that you're sharing, for example your companies' official points of views. We are expecting that you are humans telling about things. Of course, you can - if you want to share stuff from your company, that's fine, and also we encourage you to share your own experience. But of course you yourself control what you want to share about yourself and how much and whether you prefer to share ... your company or organization does”.

The facilitator’s call to be present as humans was also aimed at creating a space where all participants feel equal regardless of their professional position and background. Also, working in Zoom had an equalizing effect as the different stakeholder positions of the participants were partly invisible in the virtual platform. For example, the project group had decided *not to* ask the participants to add their organization’s name to their Zoom name, in order to be sensitive about some of the participants being unemployed job seekers. Thus, the facilitator didn’t instruct the participants on how to name themselves on Zoom, and everyone already had their actual names shown. One public sector representative had her employer’s name in front of her name. Without being prompted to do so, she had removed it in consecutive workshops. Some public sector representatives had their organization’s logo as their virtual background, but as they often kept their cameras shut, these were only briefly visible.

Diversity of the participants was brought out both by the facilitator and participants as a valuable thing for the process:

Facilitator: You come from such different backgrounds, such different organizations and experiences that are just bringing you all here together and talking together I think is going to be super, super fruitful.

The participants too brought up the value of diversity not only for aims of the workshops, but also for themselves as many participants were involved in projects related to the topic of the workshops:

Kaisa: Well the expectations as we're many people from many different backgrounds and I don't even know everybody here. So it would be very nice to hear a different point of views from other angles because I have also been doing this for years and I might be a little bit stuck with my own angle.

Silja: So looking forward to hearing some new insights since there's a quite diverse group here today.

Even though participants themselves did not emphasize their statuses or high positions they might hold, in the process of self-introduction they revealed the organizations they represent that play key roles in facilitating the employment of internationals in Finland. As a result, one of the internationals who was unemployed at that time, constructed the *other* participants as those who have the power to make a change to internationals' employment:

Bella: So what we are expecting or hoping the outcome is that this information that are going to be collected here, the new points that are going to be stated out here are going to end up somewhere. And I'm so I got so excited when I saw that there are really high figures people here the from all the different background which is amazing that the information that is going to be collected here are going somewhere further away. There's people that make decisions maybe that this the outcome is going to be, uh, put out there to companies.

Facilitator: Getting these whatever points we end up with in this process that they go somewhere is definitely one of the aims for us and we promise to do our best to make that happen. And of course, like Bella mentioned, we have such a diverse group here that I think with everyone's help we will get whatever we end up with to go where it needs to go and to make the people who need to hear it hear it.

Whilst some of the participants presented themselves as having less power than some other participants, the facilitator constructed the *group* as the one with agency due to its diversity. This position was both reaffirmed and contested by the participants at different points of the process. A company representative doubted whether the group has power over issues that were chosen to be in the vision for future the participants were to work on during the last workshop:

Jussi: I don't mean to challenge it, but kind of. I'm not sure if we as this group has that much power that we can have an effect. And yeah it's nice to focus on things what we can have an effect on, but then still the effect would be quite limited so for example I would preferably like to personally see something happening for example the language requirements which we cannot change but like I don't know.

However, at the end of the same workshop, another company representative painted a picture of the group as having all the key stakeholder groups represented, which gives the group power:

Ville: I think the major good thing is that we here represent without understanding it, both the job seekers, employers, official organizations, schools, universities, we are Finland and we agree. [--] we are here, we are all agree and that's the best evidence that we can do it.

On the one hand, these interactions revealed the practices of exploring and negotiating the power relations among the participants; on the other hand, they exposed a practice of empowering each other and the group overall for the common goal of enhancing the recruitment of internationals in Finland.

At the beginning of the process, the facilitator emphasized that the aim of working together is not necessarily to agree on everything, but still learn and co-create solutions together:

Basically, the purpose here [in this dialogue] is not to win an argument or make everyone agree with you, but basically to do exactly what your expectations were, to share the experiences, to understand other people's points of views.[--] As I mentioned, there's no need to find agreement or unanimity, but learn from each other and find something maybe new novel in these discussions.

However, the group's interaction during the workshops ended up being quite consensus-seeking. The participants were polite in speaking and reacting to what others have said. They rarely openly disagreed with what others said. Often, they stated how they agreed with others before moving onto state their point:

Jussi: Just a couple of comments, agreeing with everything what has been said very good point. What Alvar mentioned about the needs...

Also, they built on what others said and came back to what others had said before to bring out a new viewpoint:

Nora: I want to fully support what Ville said. [--] What Jussi said about, you know, companies will do something for a profit. What benefits them as an organization, which makes sense, absolutely. What we don't talk about is the thousands of international students who come to Finland, for example, right?

Overall, all participants of the workshops had a shared understanding that Finland needs to attract and retain international talents and were willing to make an effort to find the solutions to existing problems. When, for example, a company representative was introducing himself

and his interest in the workshop, he mentioned that he was involved in recruiting international talents and that he is not “allergic to foreign people”. It reflected the idea that some people are not tolerant toward foreign people, but it was clear to everyone that they are not present at the workshop.

A sense of assumed shared understanding was constructed by the participants. For example, company representatives assumed that all participants share the same goals:

Jussi: So I believe that we all each and everyone and all of us participating this workshop, we all want to see that international talents will easier get work.

Ville: And I think even this group here we are fantastic example, we all share the same goal. We are all having the same opinion but we all are working in our own cells separately. Then this now is, this is a chance, this is a wonderful beautiful chance of us working together.

Even the facilitator at times made assumptions about participants’ shared knowledge:

So, yeah, it seems that these are like, especially like challenges related to finding a paid job are one of the biggest challenges that internationals are facing. And we all know that these are these kind of challenges. (WS2)

The workshops were not aimed at discussing or questioning *whether* Finland needs internationals or not, but rather at finding solutions how to make recruitment of internationals more inclusive and efficient. During the concluding final minutes of the last workshop, one participant noted how like-minded the group had been and positioned such like-mindedness as something that does not happen “in the real life”:

Taina: I have been perhaps a little bit surprised and it has been very pleasant also that we have been very alike minded with the ideas about how we should go forward. They are pretty similar. So, we are – we think in the same way about many issues related to this international recruitment... I was just wondering, what would have happened if we were not so like-minded?

A highly skilled international contested that thought:

Nora: Thank you. I would like to disagree a little bit with Taina. I think there were some opposing opinions, maybe not on what we need to reach, not on the goals or the methods, but what is a higher priority.

The consensus-seeking nature of interaction at the workshops was emphasized by displays of emotion. When the participants were present, the facilitator only expressed positive emotions and smiled and laughed a lot. When participants were in the breakout rooms, she stopped smiling and even confessed to the co-facilitator that she was not having a good day. The facilitator reacted to participants’ sayings with expression such as “*I am very happy to hear this*” and showed and vocalized astonishment when reacting to what the group had contributed

on the virtual whiteboard “*Wow I was – I’m amazed at the kind of stuff you were able to write there such in such quick time.*”

The participants also smiled a lot, even laughed, and nodded in agreement to what others were saying. The overall atmosphere of the workshops was positive, even anticipatory in the first one. Whilst some participants did share more challenging experiences, the overall tone was quite positive and some vocalized positive emotions, such as excitement:

Ville: We had a good discussion with Jussi, we got already excited and along.

Reaching outcomes

Even if the participants had low autonomy over the process, i.e. the modes of engagement and methods used, they had high content autonomy. The research project that initiated the co-creation decided that the co-creation process would focus on recruitment of highly skilled internationals. They kept the expected outcomes of the process quite open and wanted to leave it to the participants to come up with specific problems they want to solve and solutions to them. At the beginning of the process, the facilitator told the participants that “*We’re here to find new points of views, new questions and new solutions to the recruitment of international talent in Finland.*”

Even though the initiators of the co-creation wished for to see some solutions come out of the process, many of the participants stated during the first workshop that they expected to learn from others:

This was really valuable hearing your expectations and the different perspectives you all have and I’m very happy to hear that what you all seem to have in common is hearing the different kind of experiences learning about the different perspectives and points of views. I’m very happy to hear that because this is what we will focus on especially today and continue on that in the next workshops too and also do stuff together.

There seemed to be agreement that the participants all shared the basic premise that a) having highly skilled internationals in Finland is a good thing and b) something should be done to make recruitment of internationals better:

Jussi: So I believe that we all each and everyone and all of us participating in this workshop, we all want to see that international talents will easier get work. So if that is the outcome I think that we know it already. So I would – just a personal wish that it could be something kind of in addition to that even though not going to the concrete actions yet today probably, but I hope that we would be able to kind of vision something bit more concrete together.

Here, the company representative was vocalizing expectations about going beyond just learning new things and co-creating something that would be perceived to have value. Other participants too voiced that their expectation was making a change:

Taina: My expectations are, as we talked with Idris and Vilma are not – how would I say not very slight or small because I would like to see a change happen. And it's interesting to be engaged in this process with you and see what we can come up with together, what kind of what kind of solutions or road maps or something so that we can at least make some change in in these things.

The co-creation process ended with the group deciding a shared vision for a desirable future for 2034, identifying ways of achieving this vision and actions that the participants as individuals, part of different groups/organizations and as a group can take to that would lead towards the vision. These were achieved in and through the facilitation methods and activities.

The participants also took ownership of other outcomes of the process into their own hands. For example, a public sector service provider representative invited everyone to connect on LinkedIn and invited the participants to future collaboration:

Minna: I started thinking of this networking thing that we talked about, that we already started to network and wanted to do cooperation in the future as well. I mean, but is it OK for everybody or should we somehow agree that it's OK to connect with everybody, everybody in LinkedIn or some other way? Because I have already a lot of ideas that I would like to do things with you, with you all. We have a campaign and an event on around this topic and I would like to invite you to develop that and participate in that project. But is it, I think it should, I guess it's all right for [facilitator] and others?

Facilitator: Yes, we are very happy with that.

In doing this, the participant looked to the facilitator for reaffirmation that this is acceptable, who in turn affirmed that the initiative is wanted.

Conclusions and Discussion

In this paper, we elucidated how co-creation is done *in* and *through practices* in the context of enhancing highly skilled internationals' employment. The studied co-creation was a peculiar public sector co-creation process in a sense that it was initiated by university researchers. However, it did fit Torfing et al.'s (2019, 802) definition of co-creation in the public sector as it included multiple public and private actors coming together for three workshops as

representatives of different stakeholder groups attempting to solve a shared challenge. The participants had high autonomy over the outcomes, as the initiators of the process let them decide the challenges that would be tackled and the solutions to them. We contribute to the literature on public sector co-creation by showing how a co-creation process that both *involves* highly skilled internationals and *focuses* on challenges related to their employment takes place in and through practices.

In the studied process, facilitation practices were reproduced, such as using certain methods ensure goal-oriented working and to activate the participants and ensure equal participation. In and through enacting these, the studied co-creation process emerged as a facilitated process, with a named facilitator “guiding” the group through a premediated process containing certain steps, exercises and aims for each session, supported by the technical assistance of a co-facilitator.

In general, the aim of facilitation practices is to encourage participants of a co-creation process to open dialogue, to share their practice-based knowledge (experiences) and theoretical knowledge that enable finding new solutions through mutual learning (Hogan, 2002, Lepistö, 2024). Facilitation creates the space for and enables knowledge sharing and co-creation (Lepistö, 2024, Mosely et al., 202; Reilly, 2008). Being a short, facilitated process meant that the participants had low autonomy over the process, meaning that they didn’t get to affect so much the *ways* in which the group shared knowledge and co-created. However, facilitation emerged as pluricentric (Pedersen et al., 2011): it was not solely done by the facilitators as co-creation also offered an arena for re-negotiating the aims and activities of co-creation and participants ‘taking over’ the process or co-facilitating it.

Previous research has emphasized the importance of the selection of participants to invite and securing diversity in knowledge, differences in interests, and balanced distribution of power (Lee et al., 2018). The project group that initiated the co-creation process was aware of possible power imbalances that might affect how highly skilled internationals can participate in the co-creation (Bergamaschi et al., 2021; Leino & Puumala, 2021; Ragnedda & Muschert 2013). There were for example concerns about power relations between participants who hold high positions in organizations and other participants or between “native Finns” and “internationals.” However, the potential antagonism between “local people” and “foreigners” was not visibly realized. Indeed, many participants had either foreign backgrounds or experience of living abroad themselves. Whilst

participants were invited to the process because of their stakeholder roles, the used facilitation practices de-emphasised them.

Some participants identified the others as having more power than they do. However, it was presented as an asset for the process, since they could place hope on these people to have power to change things at the “higher” level of public governance and in companies. Discussion related to having power had rather empowering (and responsabilizing) character for both people in power, but also for the diverse group as a whole.

The group that took part in co-creation was constructed as diverse, but also consensus-seeking. Diversity was emphasised in speech, but not as much in the way the group acted. The group’s interaction was consensus-seeking and the participants were very respectful in their interaction. Whilst the facilitator emphasized that the group does not need to be unanimous, the used methods and exercises also guided the group towards consensus at various points.

The studied co-creation process was designed as a closed process to be organized for and with a group of invited participants. Ansell, Sørensen, and Torfing (2024) have warned about having “closed clubs” where people coming to solve problems are too like-minded and possibly privileged which might lead to shutting out newcomers. The studied group was diverse on the outset and its participants possessed quite different backgrounds and were expected to not share such similar knowledge and privileges. However, the participants seemed to agree on certain premises, such as that internationals are valuable for Finland and that services should be offered for both internationals and companies. They all seemed to see a mismatch between current service provision, the employment outcomes, and the needs of highly skilled internationals. Hence, common nominators were easy to find.

One participant tried to contest whether “like-mindedness” of the group was good for the process or not. It seems that the process was not able to fully utilize the power of the diversity of the group and consensus seeking came partly at the price of multivocality. However, given that the topic of the co-creation – employment of immigrants – is a heated topic, the fact that a diverse group was able to harmoniously work together has value in itself. Also, the group didn’t turn into a “closed club”: the participants were seeking to take the outcomes of the process outside the group and together open up the message of the group to the world too. However, it could be postulated that the short amount of time did not enable the creation of trust between

the participants and prevented them from coming up with novel solutions or finding new ways to look at common challenges.

Further research

In this paper, we have not paid much attention to the fact that the workshops were organized online. We recognize that working online affects the co-creation process, especially within the discourse of sociomateriality of a practice (Shotter, 2013). In this paper we didn't emphasize it; however, in future research, it would be important to study the online aspect more carefully. For example, how the chosen space and place, whether on-line or in the same physical space, facilitates or hinders co-creation practices? What kinds of new practice emerge when stakeholders come together in a virtual space? (see e.g. Schatzki, 2022). When and why do some participants switch their cameras off? Has it something to do with power relations? And overall, how is online co-creation embodied by participants?

Also, since the process that we studied was relatively short (three two-hour sessions), the emergence of new practices was limited. The situation might have been different if the participants had got to know each other better, had started to create a sense of belonging to the group and trust between each other and felt it more appropriate to challenge the ideas and understandings of other participants and facilitator.

Another question for further research comes from the decision made by project researchers to invite only those people who do not clearly expose their negative attitude towards international employees. Therefore, there still remains a question of how would inviting people who have doubts about recruitment of international change the dynamics of the discussion and its outcomes?

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