

# SOCIAL PROCUREMENT IN THE REAL WORLD: HOW EMPLOYMENT REQUIREMENTS UNFOLD IN CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS

Daniella Troje<sup>1</sup> and Pernilla Gluch

*Department of Technology Management and Economics, Chalmers University of Technology, Vera Sandbergs Allé 8, SE-412 96, Göteborg, Sweden*

In hopes of mitigating issues with segregation, unemployment and a lack of workers in the construction sector, social procurement and employment requirements are becoming increasingly popular. Albeit high on the policy and industry agenda, little is known of its effects for practitioners and the newly employed themselves, when they face these in practice. With an aim to understand how social procurement and employment requirements unfold in practice, what effects this has for construction practitioners, for the interns themselves, and for individual projects and organizations, 23 semi-structured interviews were conducted with practitioners and interns in three cases where employment requirements have been applied. The findings show that for practitioners, employment requirements place new demands on themselves as “receivers” of interns, which require personal engagement. For the interns, demands are set on how they should engage in their internship and to seize the opportunity, while same-time facing a risk to become overexposed for advertisement purposes if they perform well. For the construction projects a concern is raised regarding safety, due to the interns’ poor language proficiency. However, also positive effects are seen, such as improved team spirit among the project members and added value to the working life of the intern supervisors.

Keywords: employment requirements, social procurement, interns, Sweden

## INTRODUCTION

Social criteria are increasingly used in construction procurement, where social criteria relating to employment of vulnerable groups are one of the more widely used types (Montalban-Domingo *et al.*, 2019). With the objective to mitigate issues with social exclusion and unemployment among certain demographic groups, like immigrants, youths, or disabled people (Enochsson and Andersson 2016) employment requirements (ER) is becoming more frequently used in Swedish procurement practice (Upphandlingsmyndigheten 2019). Several Swedish construction and real estate organizations also see employment requirements as a tool for recruitment, where the beforementioned demographics are an untapped source of possible employees, which is needed to meet the high demand for construction in Sweden (*ibid*).

Although social procurement has been used throughout the 1900’s to enact social policies (McCrudden 2004), the recent wave of social procurement initiatives is just now taking form, with some countries being ahead of others. In Scotland,

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<sup>1</sup> daniella.troje@chalmers.se

employment requirements (there called community benefit clauses) have become business as usual, and in both Scotland and North Ireland specific work roles, aimed exclusively at working with social procurement, are becoming increasingly common (Sutherland *et al.*, 2015; Murphy and Eadie 2019). This development is also seen in Sweden (Troje and Gluch 2019).

Many actors within the sector are positive towards social procurement, and believe it is a good tool for enabling knowledge sharing, building competences, deeper collaboration throughout the supply chain, meeting client demands, and employment creation (Erridge 2007; Sutherland *et al.*, 2015; Barraket *et al.*, 2016, Murphy and Eadie 2019). At the same time, some scepticism persists in how social procurement may cost more than traditional procurement, that it may displace “ordinary” workers, and that employment requirements are difficult to evaluate (Erridge 2007; Walker and Brammer, 2009; Zuo *et al.*, 2012; Eadie and Rafferty 2014; Barraket *et al.*, 2016; Loosemore 2016). To address some of these issues and to ensure that the “right” social value is created, Murphy and Eadie (2019) suggest that social procurement should adopt a more person-centric approach, where bespoke practices for each newly employed is established according to their needs and skills.

In Sweden, social procurement is rather novel, and as of today no industry-wide best practice exist (Sävfenberg 2017; Troje and Kadefors 2018). Nevertheless, interviewed pioneers state that when it comes to implementing employment requirements in Sweden, there are high prospects that employment requirements will mitigate problems such as unemployment, segregation and also provide the sector with new labour (Troje and Gluch 2019). The issue of social procurement is thus high on the policy and industry agenda, but less is done in regard to an empirical examination of its effects and how employment requirements actually work in practice (Troje and Gluch 2019). To fill this gap this paper investigates the practical effects of employment requirements for practitioners, as well as for the newly employed themselves when they face employment requirements in their every-day work life.

### **Perspectives on Social Procurement**

Employment issues in social procurement have covered everything from fair working hours and wages, employment of disabled veterans in the UK, affirmative action for African Americans in the US, and the treatment of aboriginal populations in Canada (McCrudden 2004). Studies have focused on measures to benefit local, small, or minority-owned businesses (Walker and Preuss 2008, Loader 2012, Loosemore and Denny-Smith 2016) as well as on social enterprises (Loosemore 2016). Although there is a general lack of knowledge about social procurement in the construction sector (Walker and Brammer 2009; Zuo *et al.*, 2012), some studies discuss benefits of and barriers to social procurement (for examples see Erridge 2007; Eadie and Rafferty 2014; Barraket *et al.*, 2016). However, there is scant research of what employment requirement means for the workers closest to the newly employed, what this means for how they organize their work, and how they cope with incorporating a social value initiative in their daily work. Erridge’s (2007) mixed-methods study of a pilot project consisting of several contracts using employment requirements in Northern Ireland is an exception. He found that few respondents perceived that employment requirements increased the administrative work load. However, training was lacking for the newly employed who had no construction background. Despite of this, the jobs were sustainable over time, where 46 out of 51 people employed through the employment requirements maintained their employment after the project ended. However, he also

states that there is a need to ensure to not over-emphasize commercial goals, as these may undermine the achievement of socio-economic goals (ibid.).

Social procurement can thus bring successful outcomes both for construction practitioners and the newly employed, but it may also be difficult as social procurement comes with a different set of logics than traditional construction procurement (Petersen 2018). Firstly, social procurement does not focus on easy-to-measure tangible criteria such as price or quality; and discards a market logic for a social value logic (ibid.). Social procurement thus entails a deviation from traditional work practices and instead aims to deliver social value, which lies outside of the contractor's area of expertise (Murphy and Eadie 2019). Secondly, social criteria do not pertain directly to the object of procurement. Third, the construction sector is characterized by loosely coupled actors who collaborate while maintaining some level of independence and agency (Dubois and Gadde 2002). In social procurement, clients are suddenly dictating what type of workers contractors should hire, e.g. unemployed immigrants (Petersen 2018). Social procurement thus majorly differs from traditional construction procurement, potentially leading to conflicts between institutional logics.

One way of looking at social criteria is in the form of an innovation. Kurdve and de Goey (2017) studied a project where unemployed people were given employment to build standardized modular houses. This created simple jobs in the construction sector for immigrants lacking construction experience, as well as created more temporary housing. Here employment of marginalised groups is a kind of service for the municipality, who often also is the customer of the temporary modular housing (Kurdve and de Goey 2017). In contrast, in North Ireland Murphy and Eadie (2019) found that social procurement is largely being driven by social legislation and is by contractors seen as a contractual obligation rather than a tool for social innovation.

## **METHOD**

To study practical effects of employment requirements, a qualitative research approach was employed, which capture actions, thoughts and beliefs of the ones studied (Silverman 2013). This study includes three different cases where interns were employed due to employment requirements (ER) posed by the construction client. Thus, we refer to these interns as ER interns since they differ from regular interns in the sense that they come from disadvantaged backgrounds and are stigmatized in the labour market. For immigrants, they may have poor Swedish skills, may come from traumas, or have undocumented and inconsistent schooling. For people with disabilities they may have physical or mental barriers to overcome in the work place. ER interns thus have backgrounds and special needs regular interns do not. The first case is a construction project of apartment housing (AH) for a private housing company. The second case is a construction project of a public pre-school (PS). Both construction projects are built by the same large Swedish construction company where the two different clients had posed employment requirements to employ ER interns. The third case is a specific model used by a group of public housing companies (PHG) to create employment opportunities in form of internships for unemployed immigrants in their subsidiary companies.

By the help of managers at both the large Swedish contractor in case 1 and 2 and in the public housing group, interviewees for the study were identified, which led to 23 semi-structured interviews (Kvale 2007). The interviewees are henceforth referred to by an anonymous code (see table 1). The interviewees from the AH and PS cases work with production, mostly on site, or closely with implementing the employment

requirements from the client organization side. Interviewees from the case PHG work with building maintenance in the different subsidiary housing companies. Thus, the interviewees from all cases have experienced practical effects from the employment requirements, and also work on a daily basis with the ER interns.

*Table 1: List of interviewees*

Project	Client relationship	Example of roles	Individual interviewee codes
Apartment housing (AH)	Private for private	District manager, project manager, site manager, ER intern	AH 1–7
Pre-school (PS)	Private for public	District manager, project manager, site manager, work leader, ER intern, public procurement officer	PS 1–6
Public housing group (PHG)	Public for public (internal client)	Facilities maintainers of buildings and green areas, ER intern	PHG 1–10

Data was collected during autumn 2018-spring 2019. The interviews, which lasted for about one hour, focused on the interviewees’ perceptions and experiences, positive and negative, from employment requirements, how it affects their daily work, and what changes in their practices they had to make to accommodate the ER interns. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and to enable a systematic review data was coded in a software program (NVivo). To identify common themes all the material was first inductively coded according to topics discussed in the interviews. This inductive coding allowed for unexpected patterns to emerge, which was important considering that social procurement is rather unexamined both academically and empirically (Edmondson and McManus 2007). Then, to ensure that the codes reflected the material as accurately as possible all codes were re-coded in order to refine the coding structure. After these two coding rounds 11 categories of codes emerged: (1) work tasks, processes and experiences with ER, (2) resources to work with ER, (3) choice of ER interns, (4) employment terms and contact with government bodies, (5) future for ER interns, (6) working tasks of ER interns, (7) ER interns' perceptions of their working life, (8) what worked well, (9) what worked poorly, (10) relationships between project participants, and (11) current form and future development of employment requirement practice. From these 11 categories of codes, three main themes were identified, concerning effects for (1) the construction practitioners, (2) the ER interns, and for (3) the project and organization. These three themes were analysed using the theoretical framework of previous research on social procurement.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Practical effects for the construction practitioners**

Many of the interviewees explained how they as “receiver” of the ER interns felt pressured by a personal expectation to provide the ER interns with meaningful work. They stressed the importance of having the right prerequisites to achieve this: “Having targets [with employment requirements] are important, but other things are also important [...] You have to be able to create the right conditions for things to work. It comes down to the people, the intern and the supervisor, but also the employer [...] It’s about creating opportunities for relationships and situations where people can grow” (PHG1).

Further, the interviewees expressed how they wanted to ensure that they as a supervisor can support the ER interns so they could provide a ‘high quality internship’ with fair working conditions. They felt, for example, uncertainties regarding if the ER interns got a fair compensation for their work, which put unnecessary stress on them.

In the pre-school project the team have been struggling with such issues several times. One interviewee described a situation where one ER intern was without pay for a several weeks, but how they have now learnt from those experiences: “Something that we’ve learnt, is that when somebody new comes here, we ask them on their first day what their compensation is. And if we don’t think it’s okay, then we have the option of having them on a paid internship for three months instead. So, they get fair compensation. It needs to feel fair for all of us” (PS2). Nevertheless, many of the interviewees realized some uncertainties regarding compensation might be acceptable in the short-term, since main focus is on creating job opportunities. One interviewee (PHG2) explained his view: “I think that for those who come here, they should be able to count on us and feel that when they’ve gone through with this [internship] they have a chance to get a job. That has to be the most important thing”.

This pressure to be a “good” supervisor led to a high degree of personal engagement in the ER interns as persons, and not only in their work. Even though many interviewees who work as supervisors had been advised to uphold a strictly professional relationship with the ER interns, many found this difficult since there were so many private things that the interns also need help with, for example reading Swedish emails, paying bills, writing CVs, and even helping them find new housing for them and their families: “They come with their bills, and ask for help how to pay them. We were told [at the supervisor course] not to do that, but it’s difficult when they don’t understand how to do it. To help write CVs and fill in applications, .... You’re not supposed to do that, but it depends on the person, how you engage. It becomes emotional, ...” (PHG5). For the interviewees, supervising the ER interns opened a possibility to meet the people “behind the news reports”, e.g. relating to the 2015 refugee crisis. Here employment requirements provided a space to meet people they would not normally meet, and many stories of different situations where this became particularly clear was told during the interview. Sweden being a cold country provided one such story: “He [an intern originally from Africa] had so much clothes on but was still cold. ... And it’s not like he was saying that ‘I won’t go out’, because he does what he’s supposed to do. The other day it was really cold, and we were down by the harbour, I needed to change a bulb in a light post. It’s kind of tricky, and it takes some time with the light fixtures, so I let him stay in the car. I put the heat on and let him stay in the car” (PHG3).

Getting personally engaged with the ER interns provided a feeling that the interviewees were contributing to them personally, as well as to wider society, one interviewee (PHG2) said: “[The intern] told me that after he had gotten employment, he got his life back. I think that’s big, it’s very cool.”. Another interviewee (PHG1) said “I think it is kind of dope, to work for a company that has ambitions that go beyond the quarterly reports”. Although the interviewees tend to become personally involved with the ER interns and their lives, they also struggle with an uncertainty that their work might not actually have any long-term positive effects for the ER interns. There is scant follow-up regarding how many of the interns receives permanent employment, and there is no formal feedback of what happens with specific ER interns. In the case where the interviewees know what happened to their interns after the internship ended, it is often because they have stayed in personal contact with the intern, or that they found out by chance, e.g. by running in to them outside of work: “With some interns I don’t know what happened. I think that is a shame, that we don’t get information on what happened with those that we’ve worked with for 6 months. But one lives here in the area, so I see him sometimes. It’s great when he

tells me how things are going. When you work with someone three days a week, you talk about life, problems, you get engaged in their lives, perhaps more than you should” (PHG5).

### **Practical effects for the ER interns**

The interviewees also felt that in order to offer high quality internships, demands also need to be set also on the ER interns: “We make our working place and resources available in order to help people. And if they don’t want help, then I don’t think it’s our role to try and coax and nag them to come here. In those cases, we have simply ended [the internship]” (AH1). The ER interns themselves are expected to be equally engaged in their work: “As a supervisor, I have some level of responsibility, but that is of course shared with the intern. You have a shared responsibility that the [internship] is a meaningful time, because you don’t get rich coming here. Instead you hopefully gain experience and know more things when you leave. So that is a responsibility. [...] I offer many opportunities for those that are ready to take them, to practice their abilities to hold a conversation in Swedish” (PHG1). An example of creating meaningful work even when the ER intern cannot contribute much, or is out of their element, e.g. due to meetings held in Swedish, is: “It’s about finding a meaningful perspective in different contexts, it can be a meeting of some sort, with a contractor, or an internal meeting [in Swedish]. So, the intern shouldn’t just zone out [because of language], to think that this goes above one’s head. Instead, don’t mind the language, grab some words from the PowerPoint!” (PHG1). On the flipside, when internships have been going well this can lead to an overexposure of the ER interns, who can be used for advertisements: “When we take someone in, I think they are just like anybody else. I can notice a tendency that some wants to raise this all the time, and I don’t like that. It bothers me because they are people and I have taken them in because of who they are, but there are many who wants to sell [employment requirements], and that doesn’t feel right to me” (PS4).

### **Practical effects for the project and organization**

A major difficulty and barrier for ER to be fully implemented is said to be language issues, but also a lack of understanding of the Swedish work culture: “It’s been more demanding than what I thought. The most difficult thing with the interns [refugees] is the language, to make yourself understood. Because they need to understand me and I need to understand them. That’s the difficult part” (PHG5). Also, some of the day-to-day tasks of the supervisors, and thereby the accompanying ER interns, includes much communication with residents and tenants: “It’s a lot of language in the role of a building maintainer, it’s about communication, both with tenants and contractors” (PHG1). Not only does this hinder the socialization of the ER intern into the work group, but it also makes supervision difficult, and increases safety issues, in relation to the heavy machinery operated in both construction and in building maintenance. One interviewee (PHG3) explained: “Safety is very, very important. And that includes everything from how you lift things to how you handle machinery. For example, a handheld grass mower with a motor: To try and explain to someone who doesn’t know that many Swedish words, that you can absolutely never ever put your fingers under the machine. Things like that are very important”.

In addition, there are other difficulties in relation to the projects themselves, which may hinder employment requirements. An interviewee (PS2) summarized the issue, relating to the size of the project, the nature of the work, and lack of suitable candidates: “In a big project, they have much more diverse tasks, so there I can

imagine that you can employ people without a background in construction”, and “We explained to the municipality, we cannot take anyone. If they are supposed to be a carpenter apprentice, they must know some basics, to use the tools. So we can’t just take in a layman carpenter”, and “We formulated this contract that we would take in ten interns. But after a while we realized that we will never reach ten interns, so the original idea wasn’t well-thought out”.

At the same time as there are many practical barriers connected to employment requirements and the ER interns, the interviewees emphasize how they are ordinary employees, and are doing a job like anybody else: “I have chosen all of them because I think they add value to our group, not because of where they come from” (AH1). In addition, they are expected to perform real tasks on real terms: “There are no simple jobs. Some think [the interns] should only pick up trash. But they come along and do the same job we do [...] They shouldn’t only do the boring tasks [...] They must feel like they’re here on the same terms as we are, because I wouldn’t want to go to Iraq and only pick up trash. They need to be involved and be able to see that you can advance [in your career]. The more you learn the more you can climb the ladder [...] They should have all the possibilities” (PHG2). Although their status is emphasized as “just like anybody else”, there are instances where the interns’ status is very different from the rest of the staff, particularly in relation to their compensation, which we gave examples on earlier.

Besides (the ambition to) perform work like everybody else, the ER interns and employment requirements create perceived added value for a larger system outside of the individual project and organization. When a work group jointly engages in an intern it ties the team closer together. Because taking on ER interns does require some adjustments, it is seen as a receipt that the team is well functioning overall if the team can also successfully take on an intern: “Everybody got very engaged, and of course that creates team spirit. And everybody was very concerned that [the intern] would do well. So, in such a situation, it brings the team closer together” (PS2).

For the interviewees added value was found also on a more personal level: “I think [working with the interns] gives me some sort of added value in my employment” (PHG1). Another interviewee (PHG3) said: “I feel all the time that I am happy to be able to help, to help a person who hopefully shall live and feel good here, to have a good life, that work, and everybody benefits from. If people around us are feeling good, then we all feel good [...] To get to know the person and have fun together”. At the same time, many of the interviewees stress that even though they are generally positive towards employment requirements and the effects it might bring, it is not a “be all end all” solution: “I think it’s great that we’re doing this, we give these people a chance. But we have to ensure that we get results in the end. We can’t succeed with everybody, but we should have the goal that everybody gets employment” (PHG2), and “As a society, we must understand that [employment requirements] are not what will fix the segregation. It’s a small complement where a few can succeed” (AH1).

## **DISCUSSION**

As shown from the findings, many things happen when employment requirements are used and ER interns are taken in, for construction practitioners, for the ER interns themselves, and for the projects and organizations. Something interesting is how the projects and organizations must make accommodations as the ER interns have language barriers and often no background within construction or building maintenance, resulting in some tasks being difficult (e.g. communicating with

tenants), and some task being dangerous (e.g. operating heavy machinery). This mirrors much of Erridge's (2007) findings regarding a lack of training for interns. At the same time, the ER interns are to be treated like any other employee, performing the same tasks as their colleagues and supervisors as "there are no simple jobs". In this sense, there is a contradiction in the way the ER interns are viewed. On the one hand adjustment in daily practices must be made, but on the other the ER interns and their work should not be acknowledged as any different. The question then becomes if this contradiction hinders or helps the ER interns in their journey of finding permanent employment and learning Swedish. If ER interns are not given proper support, they may miss out on learning opportunities because they are constantly trying to catch up. At the same time, if ER interns receive too much special treatment, they may become incapacitated and less independent, as well as feel cosseted. How to achieve this balance may be difficult to know without more experience, but his reflection is in line with Murphy and Eadie's (2019) conclusion that bespoke practices and a person-centric perspective is important to achieve social value. How to actually achieve that is however still unclear. What is clear from the findings is the perception that value is created, both for the ER interns, the individual supervisors, for the work teams and for the project as a whole. This suggests that social procurement can serve as a value-adding function and service in the sector (cf. Kurdve and de Goey 2017).

Having said that, although some practices should be bespoke, some practices could benefit from being routinized for an effective use of employment requirements. Firstly, routines relating to government bureaucracy in terms of how to handle compensation issues should be improved, starting with increasing the knowledge thereof. This is in line with previous research on social procurement, where authors (Zuo *et al.*, 2012; Barraket *et al.*, 2016; Loosemore 2016) have pointed to a general lack of knowledge about social procurement, which can relate to e.g. compensation schemes for ER interns.

Secondly, routines relating to follow-up of the ER interns would not only help mitigate problems of lack of evaluation of social procurement like found in previous research (Erridge 2007; Walker and Brammer 2009; Barraket *et al.*, 2016; Loosemore 2016), but would also benefit the supervisors, who rarely get feedback on what happens to their ER interns after the internship ended, and are unsure of the long-term effect of their work. Perhaps Erridge's (2007) findings that many employed through employment requirements maintain sustained employment can be an indicator that ER interns in Sweden may have the same opportunities.

Lastly, routines on how to handle tasks that formally go beyond supervisory tasks, like helping to pay bills and read emails, should be put in place. Since supervisors are sometimes the principal Swedish contact person for (newly immigrated) ER interns, their formal work tasks and resources to perform those tasks may need to become widened to also include non-work-related issues. If the ultimate goal of employment requirements is permanent employment and increased integration, widening of supervisory responsibilities seems pertinent. Establishing these routines would however suggest an increase in administrative burden, contradicting Erridge's (2007) findings. As of today, many of the tasks undertaken by the supervisors of the ER interns may traditionally have been performed by social worker or the like. Thus, the role of supervisors and construction practitioners change when using employment requirements. Such extra-curricular tasks point to a need for extra resources, especially in terms of time, thereby potentially leading to increased costs, something which previous studies (Erridge 2007; Walker and Brammer, 2009; Zuo *et al.*, 2012;



Eadie and Rafferty 2014; Barraket *et al.*, 2016; Loosemore 2016) have shown is a concern in the construction sector.

## CONCLUSION

This paper adds to previous research by providing details for how social procurement and employment requirements unfold in practice, and what effects this has for construction practitioners, ER interns, and individual projects and organizations. For construction practitioners, this entails new demands on themselves as “receivers” of the ER interns, which in turn require personal engagement in the interns and their private lives. At the same time, there are uncertainties on what this means in the long-run for the ER interns and society. For the ER interns, they are faced with demands from their supervisors on how they should engage in their internship, while at the same time they may become overexposed in advertisement purposes if they perform well. For projects, many barriers to the effective use of employment requirements were identified, especially in terms of language barriers, safety issues and how projects are structured. Also, even though many barriers exist, ER interns are expected to perform tasks like anybody else. Lastly, although employment requirements are difficult to implement, ER interns add value to a larger system outside of the individual project and organization, both in terms of increased team spirit among project members, and for adding value to the work life of individual supervisors.

Future research could build on these findings by looking into what resources and formal processes are created in order to implement employment requirements and employ ER interns: What is needed and what is lacking in projects today in order to facilitate the increased use of employment requirements? Future research could also investigate how expectations and plans for employment requirements in central organizations and amongst clients align with how they actually work in practice. Further, as there is scarce research in how social procurement works in practice in construction organizations and individual projects, future research could look into nascent research field on migrant workers, interns, and corporate social responsibility. In addition, a limitation of this study is its focus on western countries, therefore, studies on social procurement practice from other contexts are most welcome.

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