

NGO NETWORK OF INTEGRATION FOCAL POINTS

POLICY BRIEFING ON INTRODUCTION PROGRAMMES AND LANGUAGE COURSES FOR REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS IN EUROPE

'The first priorities that a country has to care for have to be: language, work and accommodation. The obligation of any country is to help the refugee make a new start.'



In 2004, the European Council adopted the Common Basic Principles (CBP) on Immigrant Integration and in 2005, in its Communication A Common Agenda for Integration, the Commission developed these principles into a framework with action points at national and European levels.¹ This policy briefing focuses on the implementation of CBP 4:

‘Basic knowledge of the host society’s language, history, and institutions is indispensable to integration; enabling immigrants to acquire the basic knowledge is essential to successful integration.’

In most Member States, this principle is pursued by the development and implementation of introduction programmes and/or integration or citizenship exams for refugees and migrants. In many Member States, these programmes are part of a national integration strategy or policy in which local authorities play an important role in their implementation. Other implementing actors are educational institutions, private sector organisations and NGOs.

Most courses contain a language component and information on the receiving countries’ society and culture, including an increasing emphasis on ‘Western norms and values’. In some countries, refugees and migrants (with some exceptions) are compelled to participate in such programmes and could be penalised (mainly through withdrawal of benefits) when they do not attend. In most countries, the courses are free of charge, but in some, refugees and migrants have to pay the costs themselves (for example in the Netherlands).

Introduction programmes are potentially an important tool for the integration of refugees and migrants. It is clearly in the interest of both receiving societies and refugees and migrants that such programmes are effective.

Recommendations for the European Common Agenda on Integration

NATIONAL INTRODUCTION PROGRAMMES

In many Member States, there is a lack of a coherent national policy or strategy for the integration of refugees and migrants. Governments’ investment in introduction programmes vary widely, for example Italy spends only €42 million² a year on specific integration programmes in comparison to €493 million in Denmark. Local authorities, therefore, often do not have the resources to implement introduction programmes effectively and have a lack of qualified staff to respond to the various needs of refugees and migrants. In addition, there is an uneven provision of programmes within countries. In rural areas authorities particularly struggle to offer programmes that meet refugees and migrants’ needs.

All Member States should have an integration strategy with a coherent and consistent national introduction programme. A substantial increase in funding is necessary in most Member States to increase the availability and quality of introduction programmes. The resources should be allocated effectively and strategically to facilitate the provision of the introduction programmes and language courses in both urban and rural areas.

INTRODUCTION PROGRAMMES FOR ALL

In most countries, asylum seekers are excluded or have limited access to introduction programmes. This has a negative impact on their integration process and that of their children. Also, those with subsidiary forms of protection are sometimes excluded from introduction programmes despite the fact that they have exactly the same needs as recognised refugees. In addition, there is a need to address the integration needs of migrants who are long-term residents.

Member States should offer introduction programmes to all refugees and migrants, including asylum seekers³ and those with subsidiary forms of protection, and ideally not only to newcomers, but also to people who have already been in the country for some time.

INTRODUCTION PROGRAMMES AND THE LABOUR MARKET

Introduction programmes generally do not sufficiently connect with vocational training or the labour market and often lack proper follow up. After completion refugees and migrants are often unable to access further training or education and/or need more individual support to find suitable employment.

Introduction programmes should be rooted in the local community and include good contacts with employers. Depending on their needs and aspirations, participants should receive individual assistance from a trained professional to facilitate progress towards further language or vocational training, voluntary work, work placements, (higher) education or suitable employment.

QUALITY AND AVAILABILITY OF LANGUAGE COURSES

The availability, quality and length of language courses vary across Europe. The number of hours is often insufficient to achieve a language level necessary to progress towards further training, education or suitable employment. Teaching methods used are sometimes not suitable and teachers are not always suitably qualified and/or sufficiently trained in methods for teaching a second language.

In all Member States, the quality of the teaching should be commensurate to the mainstream education service. The receiving country should ensure that the teaching of the language courses is delivered by professionals adequately trained in the instruction of the language as a second language.

INTRODUCTION PROGRAMMES TAILORED TO INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

Obviously, refugees and migrants are a very diverse group with different educational levels, professional backgrounds, family commitments, and aspirations. However, introduction programmes tend to be packages, where highly educated and illiterate persons sometimes follow the same language classes. Introduction programmes are more effective when they are tailored to the individual needs of refugees and migrants.

Introduction programmes should take into account individual circumstances (for example childcare needs or other commitments), language needs, educational level, and social needs of the participants. Particular attention should be paid to the most vulnerable groups, such as single parents and people who are illiterate.

INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN INTRODUCTION PROGRAMMES

In recent years there has been a growing tendency to connect integration policies to admission policies. Integration requirements such as language skills or knowledge of the host country are increasingly becoming a precondition not only for obtaining citizenship, but also for entry and residence permit. In addition, to ensure participation in the introduction/language programmes, the emphasis is mostly on sanctions (such as reductions in benefits).

Introduction programmes should be free of charge and participation should be stimulated by positive incentives rather than sanctions. Integration requirements such as language skills or knowledge of the host countries' history, culture and values should not be a precondition for obtaining entry or residence permits.

¹See Council Conclusions, Immigrant Integration Policy in the European Union, 14615/04 of 19 November 2004 and the Communication from the European Commission on A Common Agenda for Integration – Framework for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals in the European Union, September 2005, COM (2005) 389.

²See European Commission, Communication on immigration, integration and employment, 3 June 2003, COM (2003) 336 final.

³The European Parliament calls upon Member States “to make provisions for integration-related measures for refugees during the reception phase, such as language courses and voluntary work activities, taking in consideration the fact that the integration process for refugees starts during the reception phase.” Report on strategies and means for the integration of immigrants in the European Union, 6 July 2006, (2006/2056(INI)).

EXAMPLES OF INTRODUCTION PROGRAMMES

DENMARK

A three-year introduction programme offers good opportunities to learn the language and takes into account different levels of ability. Attention is also paid to the professional and educational background of refugees and migrants and support is tailored (to a certain extent) to the individuals' needs, and includes employment-promoting activities. However, the approach has negative elements, with a focus on sanctions rather than incentives, and little attention to barriers in society such as (indirect) discrimination.

FINLAND

In the last few years, there have been advancements both in the quality and availability of integration programmes and language courses. A positive step has been the possibility to extend the period for completing the integration plan from the normal three years to five years for maternity or sickness cases. However, asylum seekers and people with temporary residence permits are excluded from the programmes.

ITALY

There are many local projects that are tailored to the needs of the local area. NGOs can apply to local authorities for projects, for example programmes that offer work placements for refugees and sensitise employers to the benefits of employing refugees and migrants. However, there is no overall integration strategy; integration programmes are in general 'one package for all' and there is a lack of funding.

THE NETHERLANDS

In the Netherlands introduction programmes are accessible for migrants who are long-term residents but still have integration needs. Programmes are obligatory, candidates need to pay for their own programme and there is a strong emphasis on sanctions when people fail to participate.

This policy briefing has been produced by the NGO Network of Integration Focal Points, which brings together 28 non-governmental organisations in 19 European countries in the refugee and migration field with the aim of advocating for better integration policies and practices for refugees and migrants in Europe. The Network is coordinated by the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) in liaison with Caritas Europa. The Network was established in June 2005 and received financial support from the European Commission (INTI preparatory Actions 2004) and the Network of European Foundations (European Programme for Integration and Migration) from September 2006 to February 2007.

This policy briefing is part of a series of six on the integration of refugees and migrants in Europe addressing the following topics: Housing; Introduction and language courses; Assessment of skills and recognition of qualifications; Vocational training and (higher) education; Employment and employment support; and Civic and political participation.

The European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) is an umbrella organisation for cooperation between almost 80 European non-governmental organisations in 31 countries concerned with refugees. For more information: www.ecre.org

Caritas Europa is one of the seven regions of Caritas Internationalis, a confederation of 162 Catholic relief, development and social service organisations working to build a better world, especially for the poor and oppressed, in over 200 countries and territories. For more information: www.caritas-europa.org

For more information on both organisations' positions on refugee/migrant integration:

ECRE's *The Way Forward: Europe's role on the global refugee protection system – 'Towards the Integration of Refugees in Europe'*, July 2005
Caritas Europa's *Integration – A process involving all*, March 2004

FRONT COVER: This quote has been taken from ECRE's *Refugee Stories* project, which relates the experience of men and women who have sought sanctuary in one of 12 EU countries over the past ten years. More information: www.ecre.org/refugeestories/

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