



Home Office

## Integrating refugees

What works? What can work? What does not work? A summary of the evidence  
second edition

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# Introduction

This document provides a summary of the existing evidence on integrating refugees. It draws upon the most recent research from academics and that conducted by Migration and Border Analysis in the Home Office.

## Amendments

Charsley, K., and Spencer, S. (2019) 'Understanding integration processes: informing policy and practice', Policy Report 44, has been added to the reference list and in-text additions have been made relating to this new reference.

# What works in integrating refugees?

## Cultural orientation

- For resettled refugees, pre-departure orientations can facilitate integration by preventing misunderstanding and promoting a realistic idea of the receiving community, its expectations for refugees, likely problems and how these can be overcome (UNHCR, 2002). Unrealistic expectations, and therefore large gaps between expectations and the reality migrants found themselves in, leads to poorer wellbeing (Collyer *et al.*, 2018).
- Standardised post-arrival cultural orientations are also useful to reinforce what was learnt prior to arrival and to ensure consistent information sharing (Home Office, 2019a).
- There are also examples of workshops that provide key cultural information on refugee communities delivered to community sponsors as part of the community sponsorship scheme (<https://unitedkingdom.iom.int/integration>).

## Language skills are intrinsic to refugee integration and wellbeing

- Language programmes which are tailored to the diverse needs of refugees are most effective. This includes informal learning opportunities for those with limited educational background and fast track programmes for those with higher level skills (Morrice, Tip, Collyer, and Brown, 2019).
- Refugees with poor language skills are most at risk of exclusion and long-term dependency (Collyer *et al.*, 2018).
- Language skills are intrinsic for accessing employment. Research in Germany found even intermediate fluency in the native language significantly increased the likelihood of refugees finding employment (Degler and Liebig, 2017).
- Research indicates that higher language skills lead to more contact with other communities and improves refugee wellbeing (Tip *et al.*, 2018). This could facilitate community cohesion.
- Given the importance of language skills for integration (including through access to services and education) (Collyer *et al.*, 2018), it is recommended that access to classes and integration activities should begin as soon as possible after arrival (Degler and Liebig, 2017; OECD, 2016).
- English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) classes with a mixture of nationalities are particularly effective for the development of higher language skills as refugees meet people of different communities and cultures, allowing them to establish social networks and practise English outside of the classroom (Morrice *et al.*, 2017). Such informal English language development is likely to promote the rapid enhancement of the language skills of refugees.
- Vocational language training can facilitate integration into the labour market. One example of such training is in Sweden, where language training is provided to third-country nationals with professional degrees/experience from their country of origin. The language training is complemented by:
  - training on how their profession is organised in Sweden; and
  - how to negotiate the Swedish labour market in their field.

One to two years after finishing the programme, eight out of ten former students were self-sufficient (EMN, 2016).

## High-quality social connections promote integration

- Research indicates that the quality of social networks within and between communities, and transnationally, is positively related to the overall wellbeing of refugees (Collyer *et al.*, 2018). Social networks facilitate access to health and welfare services, financial and emotional support and also reduce feelings of isolation and depression (Cheung and Phillimore, 2016; Spicer, 2008).
- Basic training and volunteering are routes to building connections that help to improve language skills and access to services (Phillimore, 2012). There are also examples of state-sponsored connection-building. Antwerp, for example, offers subsidised rent to locals who live with newcomers (<https://www.uia-initiative.eu/en/uia-cities/antwerp>).

## Partnerships between migrant refugee community organisations and other institutions can promote positive change and integration

- Migrant refugee community organisations (MRCOs) can help to promote change in other organisations, supporting them to make their services more refugee-friendly. New ways of working can also come through such partnerships that can help bring innovation (Phillimore, 2012).
- Training MRCOs about housing options and housing markets, while simultaneously training providers about refugee housing needs, improves refugees' access to suitable housing (Mullins, 2008). Satisfaction with housing is positively correlated with wellbeing (Collyer *et al.*, 2018).

## Effective integration projects are tailored to the needs of refugees and involve long-term investment

- Participation in integration projects has a positive impact on respondents' self-esteem. Face-to-face conversations and migrant experience are powerful recruitment tools. Collaboration with other organisations and stakeholders can also help to boost recruitment.
- Evidence suggests that programmes are most effective when they are tailored for refugees, for example, taking into account:
  - the presence or absence of family networks or existing contacts in the UK;
  - the state of their mental and physical health;
  - their ability to speak English;
  - their previous qualifications; and
  - their experience of employment.These factors affect all aspects of refugees' integration (Collyer *et al.*, 2018; Cheung and Phillimore, 2014).
- Integration requires long-term investment.

- Some aspects of integration (for example, housing) will be immediate goals. Others will be more mid-term (for example, employment) to long-term (for example, home ownership) (Hart and Johnson, 2016).
- Projects need time to establish, build trust and create networks between refugees and local organisations and agencies. Refugees and migrants need time to invest in their English language skills, education and training to avoid long-term precarity and exclusion (Collyer *et al.*, 2018).

# What can work in integrating refugees?

## Projects that are adaptable, developed from best practice, co-designed, co-delivered and effectively evaluated

- Successful projects will need to adapt as their understanding of client need evolves.
- New migration has seen the emergence of migrant communities in non-traditional destinations such as rural areas and suburbs. In the future it may be necessary to focus integration initiatives in these areas, perhaps linking rural municipalities and civil society organisations to those in urban areas, so that best practice can be shared.
- A database of best practice could be developed using a crowd-sourcing approach wherein projects could input their own examples of best practice. This could inform future project development.
- The sustainable impact of integration projects could be secured by involving migrants in project delivery. This is also likely to facilitate project impact. In recent research conducted by the Home Office on cultural orientation, refugees placed significant trust in those who had been through a similar experience in integrating in a foreign country. Seeing the success of others provided encouragement and motivation to persevere through the challenges (Home Office, 2019a).
- Projects could also maintain client progression following participation through continued access to online learning materials. However, consideration should be given to the barriers refugees may face in accessing such materials including a lack of access to technology such as laptops and mobile phones.
- There is a need to measure the integration outcomes of refugees across social policy areas to identify problems and assess progress over time (Phillimore, 2012). This could also be done across countries:
  - comparing outcomes in those that have integration programmes and those that do not; and
  - identifying the types of programme that reduce integration outcome discrepancies.

This is currently prevented by a lack of harmonised EU longitudinal integration surveys.

- Effective monitoring and evaluation will avoid wasted public money on programmes that do not promote effective integration. It will also promote continuing refinement and adaptation of projects to ensure continued effectiveness in changing circumstances.
- Much more work is needed to collate good practice and to ensure that effective projects can access further funding without encountering overly bureaucratic processes.

## Focusing on the community

- Integration is a two-way process, requiring effort from refugees and the governments and societies of receiving countries. Although governments design policy frameworks, civil society has a role to play in creating conditions conducive to integration (OECD, 2016; Phillimore and Goodson, 2010).



- Providing education about the reality of migration and structured contact between majorities and minorities:
  - teaching intercultural communication skills;
  - myth-busting; and
  - embedding migrants in organisations to try and help them adapt from insider perspectives.

These can all promote integration through transforming community attitudes (Blake *et al.*, 2008; House of Commons, 2008).

- Castle (2018) highlighted the importance of educating communities to reduce anti-migrant sentiment, suggesting enhanced publicity of the positives of migration and of refugees specifically. This is particularly important as Collyer *et al.* (2018) found that refugees widely reported discrimination in institutionalised settings and public spaces, while Cheung and Phillimore (2014; 2016) have shown that experiences of racism impact on integration outcomes in health and employment.
- Public perception of integration may affect migrant experience. A recent study found the public were most likely to perceive migrants as being integrated into the community when they could speak the language fluently, made friends with the receiving community and were civically engaged (Sobolewska, Galandini, and Lessard-Phillips, 2017).

## Developing leaders in refugee communities

- Leaders inspire and can ensure that learning trickles down across communities. Effective leaders will likely come from a wide range of backgrounds and be a mixture of men and women, nationalities, statuses and ages.

## Recognising the needs of different migrant groups

- There should be 'no-one-size-fits-all' approach to integration. Those who are illiterate or low-skilled require intensive integration assistance, sometimes as long as five years. Higher-skilled migrants will need shorter durations of support to be prepared to enter the labour market. Unaccompanied minors who arrive post-compulsory schooling age also require specialised support (OECD, 2016). Many have little or no formal education and their lack of qualifications leads to low-skilled, precarious employment.
- Gender-sensitive policies are needed to ensure that women and their children become fully integrated. Measures to improve their prospects in key social policy areas could include:
  - single gender classes to minimise the impact of patriarchal family structures;
  - childcare provision to improve accessibility (UNHCR, 2013); and
  - mentors to help female refugees to navigate new institutional cultures more quickly, facilitating faster access to housing, social networks, language acquisition and employment.
- Gender-sensitive policies should also be developed to support males to adjust to different legal and social contexts. This may be particularly important in labour market integration, where evidence suggests that male asylum migrants are 19 percentage points less likely to be in professional/managerial positions relative to UK-born counterparts. For female asylum migrants, this lowers to 15 percentage points (Kone *et al.*, 2019).

- Migrants arriving as children have greater access to education, language-development and consequently employment (Capps *et al.*, 2014). Refugees arriving as teenagers can face particular disadvantage as they struggle to gain school leaving qualifications at 18. Without support to catch-up they run the risk of low-skill employment and social exclusion (Morrice, Tip, Brown and Collyer, 2019). More can be done to support this group, see for example, Morrice and Sandri (2019). Older migrants have fewer opportunities for successful integration and may even be less motivated to integrate. Specific interventions could be developed to improve integration outcomes for this group.
- Some refugees may be deterred from accessing English language classes through having little or no formal education or being illiterate in their native language. There are examples of European countries that offer literacy courses and/or special tools for teachers on how to teach those who are illiterate (EMN, 2016).
- Unaddressed health needs could hinder integration. Fazel *et al.* (2005) found that resettled refugees were around ten times more likely to have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than age-matched general populations.
- Charsley and Spencer (2019) highlight that it is not only individual-level factors that affect integration (e.g. gender, age, health), but also social factors such as care responsibilities, and the social support and social contacts available. Tailored approaches to integration should consider the individual's needs at the social level as well as the personal level.
- In recognising the needs of different groups, it is important to ensure that all refugees perceive access to integration services as fair. Refugees have cited a perceived 'two-tier' system, where those on resettlement schemes receive preferential treatment (Home Office, 2019b). The disparity between the treatment of resettled refugees and those not on such schemes has also been a concern for practitioners (IPSOS MORI, 2019).

## Strategies at the national and local level are needed to facilitate integration

- The local level is pivotal in providing the conditions for successful integration. Migrant refugee community organisations (MRCOs) can promote integration through communicating with key stakeholders and signposting to local services. But there is also a role for national refugee integration strategies that establish a clear vision on:
  - the rights and responsibilities of refugees;
  - how integration should be achieved; and
  - appropriate targets (UNHCR, 2017).
- Effective initiatives will be informed by consultation with representative groups at all levels, from national refugee organisations to smaller, grassroots community organisations (Phillimore, 2013). Consultations to inform policy should not be limited to homogeneous mainstream organisations, but should also include organisations whose unique resources and circumstances will pose specific needs and challenges.

## Strategies that facilitate migrants' access to the labour market

- Evidence suggests that labour market integration is a significant challenge for asylum migrants. There is a 12 percentage point gap in the employment rate of asylum migrants and UK-born residents after controlling for factors such as education, gender, age and ethnicity. This gap remains larger for asylum migrants than for other migrants (for example, economic migrants) (Kone *et al.*, 2019).
- Even when in employment, recent data analysis suggests that asylum migrants fare worse than UK-born residents and other migrants. Their hourly pay is 38% lower and weekly earnings 55% lower than UK-born residents. They are also 19 percentage points less likely to be in professional or managerial positions than their UK-born counterparts (*ibid.*).
- Improving access to employment should therefore be a focus when considering integration policy. The literature highlights several promising ways in which labour market integration can be increased for migrants, particularly for those seeking asylum.

### Rapid initial access to the labour market is important

- Evidence suggests that fast initial access to the labour market leads to improved employment outcomes. Until 2000 asylum seekers in Germany were barred from employment indefinitely. This restriction was then changed to 12 months. A study found that employment rates in 2005 were roughly 20% lower for refugees from the Former Republic of Yugoslavia who entered in 1999 (and who had to wait 13 to 24 months to work) compared with those refugees who arrived in 2000 (who had to wait 12 months to enter the labour market) (Marbach *et al.*, 2018).
- Fast decisions on asylum cases also facilitate access to employment. Hainmueller *et al.* (2016) found those waiting longer for an asylum decision were less likely to be in employment one year after receiving a decision on their case than those who received a decision more quickly.
- Foreign qualifications and skills should be swiftly assessed and recognised to facilitate access to the labour market (OECD, 2016). Non-recognition of previous qualifications and experience means that few refugees are able to work in the same sector that they were working in prior to resettlement (Collyer *et al.*, 2018; Phillimore & Goodson, 2006). Where there are gaps in an applicant's profile, alternative means of assessing competences could be used (Houghton and Morrice, 2008). A possible approach is the Jobprofil competency assessment in Austria. Piloted in 2015, an initial assessment is followed by an interview and the results made available to the Public Employment Service to facilitate either a placement in an apprenticeship or further career planning (EMN, 2016).

### Placing resettled refugees in geographic locations conducive to employment

- The location in which refugees are resettled can impact on their integration into the labour market. Placing refugees in localities with poor labour market conditions can hinder their integration, leading to unemployment and extended dependency on the state (Phillimore and Goodson, 2006). Refugees placed in more rural areas may also face challenges surrounding access to public transport for language classes and employment (Degler and Liebig, 2017). There are examples of countries that seek to match migrants with the most appropriate dispersal location based on factors including their education levels and work experience (OECD, 2016).

## Tailored support facilitates access to the labour market

- Specific programmes to facilitate refugees' access to the labour market could be established. Tailored mentoring, work shadowing and counselling can significantly enhance a refugee's likelihood of employment (EMN, 2016; Houghton and Morrice, 2008) as can employability pathways. A review of the evidence conducted by Ott (2013) for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) highlighted several 'promising practices':
  - individualised plans of actions around employment;
  - outreach work with employers/the private sector;
  - placements with employers;
  - vocational courses with integrated work experience;
  - assistance with recertification;
  - partnerships between public, government institutions and civil society (including non-governmental organisations [NGOs]); and
  - encouraging microenterprise/alternative employment through grants and training.
- Entrepreneurial schemes can provide refugees with the skills, knowledge and appropriate finance needed to establish social enterprises, providing self-employment in a potential absence of waged opportunities (Kone *et al.*, 2019). In 2012 the Office of Refugee Resettlement in the USA reported that 3,000 refugees received training and counselling, leading to 624 business loans totalling over \$5 million and creating 1,090 jobs (Ott, 2013). Barriers to self-employment must, however, be recognised and addressed. Collyer *et al.* (2018) found that refugees were given little support to overcome problems such as difficulty in evidencing previous qualifications; they were told that their language skills were not sufficient and the paperwork would be too difficult for them. Despite this, research suggests that over time asylum migrants are more likely to be self-employed than UK-born residents, peaking at 10 percentage points more likely after 16 to 20 years of residence. Policy interventions could seek to harness the entrepreneurial talent amongst asylum migrants (Kone *et al.*, 2019).
- Kone *et al.* (2019) found asylum migrants were 17 percentage points more likely to rely on public agencies (for example, job centres) to find employment compared with UK-born residents. Despite their extensive reliance on public agencies, asylum migrants were less likely to find employment using these agencies than UK-born residents. This suggests that there should be a renewed focus on other methods to support the integration of asylum migrants into the labour market.

## Support for employers to employ migrants

- Connecting civil society and employers can facilitate the sharing of best practice for integrating migrants into the labour market. This may be particularly beneficial as employers have reported challenges when hiring refugees regarding:
  - induction processes; and
  - concerns over documentation and the fear of subsequent Home Office investigations and penalties (Hurstfield *et al.*, 2004).This highlights the importance of clear information for employers. Examples of useful practice include recent guidelines published in May 2019 (<https://www.unhcr.org/5cc9c7ed4>), which highlight how employers can:
  - prepare refugees for the labour market;
  - make recruitment processes more accessible; and
  - promote career progression.

Case studies of possible interventions are also included in the guidelines.

## The presence of family members facilitates integration

- The presence of family members affects the sense of home felt by refugees (AMMSA, 2017) and promotes wellbeing (UNHCR, 2011). Increased use of the Dublin Regulation in a way that promotes family reunification is therefore likely to have a positive impact on integration.
- Where family members are not present, close transnational links with family and friends back home is important to reduce feelings of stress, anxiety and guilt (Collyer *et al.*, 2018).

## Supporting migrants' physical and psychological health and minimising time spent in detention

- Poor psychological wellbeing through traumatic experiences can hinder the integration of refugees, as can poor physical health arising from persecution. Those with poor mental health have poorer English language ability and are less able to advocate for themselves (Collyer *et al.*, 2018; Cheung and Phillimore, 2014; 2016). Asylum migrants are 9 percentage points more likely than UK-born residents to report having a health condition that affects the number of hours that they can work (Kone *et al.*, 2019). The wellbeing of refugees should be assessed and access to healthcare be made available. It is important to note that even with a legal right to access healthcare, consideration should also be given to other barriers that may prevent access, for example, poor language skills (OECD, 2016).
- The health of refugees may not only be attributable to pre-arrival circumstances but could also be affected by post-arrival circumstances such as isolation and exclusion from the labour market (Kone *et al.*, 2019). This should be considered when seeking to improve the health of migrants.
- Evidence suggests that the detention of asylum seekers has a negative impact on their social, physical and psychological health (Filges *et al.*, 2016). As this is likely to hinder integration, it may be beneficial for detention to be used only in exceptional circumstances and for a limited and clearly circumscribed period.

# What does not work in integrating refugees?

## A lack of support for migrant refugee community groups

- Projects seeking quick solutions or run by organisations without prior knowledge of refugees are less likely to be successful than those with experience (Phillimore, 2012). Some migrant refugee community organisations (MRCOs) may require support to participate in integration initiatives owing to a lack of experience in UK policy and practice (Phillimore and Goodson, 2010).
- Evaluation of projects at the end of their lifecycle is less effective than formative evaluation that can inform project development. Money is likely to be wasted on projects that have minimal impact through poor project management and evaluation.

## Not recognising integration as a holistic and long-term process

- Positive outcomes in one domain do not necessarily result in long-term integration. Early entry into employment that does not require knowledge of the English language, for example, can lead to segmented assimilation and long-term marginalisation (Collyer *et al.*, 2018).
- The updated Indicators of Integration framework from the Home Office (2019c) highlights that integration should be viewed as encompassing multiple factors (multi-dimensional) and involving adjustments from all in society (multi-directional). Approaches to integration that do not recognise this are unlikely to be successful. This is echoed in Charsley and Spencer (2019), who propose integration processes across domains can interact with each other, although do not always support each other, and progress in one domain can reverse. Charsley and Spencer (2019) give the example of social networks. As these expand for migrants, the ensuing increased awareness of discriminatory attitudes may lead to alienation and disengagement.



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