

Migrant Labour Market Integration Programmes: in Short Policy Lessons from the SIRIUS Research Project

Research topic: Migrants, asylum seekers and refugees (MRAs) tend, for a variety of reasons, to be less successful in host country labour markets than natives. To reduce this gap, governments have put in place specific policies. Labour market integration policies for migrants are usually centred around various active labour market policies (ALMPs) and integration training programmes. ALMP usually involves job matching and career counselling services, job market skills training, and sometimes job training or work experience programmes. Integration training include some or all of these, and additionally may offer language courses and orientation training in local workplace culture, as well as mechanisms for translation of foreign degrees and professional certifications into local equivalents. In most of the SIRIUS countries free of cost language courses are available for those migrants that take part in integration training. Integration training programmes are generally offered to only to certain migrants, and only for a limited time period.

Research data: Our research focuses on policies in seven European countries, namely the Czech Republic, Denmark, Greece, Finland, Italy, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Besides these we also focus on EU political arenas. Our research is based on interviews with migrants, refugees and asylum seekers as well as policy decision makers and implementers. Each team interviewed about 20 MRA program beneficiaries, and about 15 stakeholders, for a total of about 245 interviews for this specific research task. We also analysed a large number of policy texts to determine how issues of labour market integration are discussed by policy actors.

Findings: Barriers to labour market integration are similar across our country cases and include lack of language skills, ineffective administrative and legal structures, lack of recognition of (home country) skills and qualifications, lack of needed skills and competences, lack of networks, discrimination, exploitation, societal xenophobia and (perceived) cultural barriers. There are variations from country to country in policies to combat these barriers. In Denmark, Finland and Switzerland, MLI policies can be characterized as “top-down”, within a legislated framework in Denmark and Finland, and multi-stakeholder canton-level initiatives, in Switzerland. Bureaucracies implement these policies, and they may also engage other actors, such as NGOs and employers. Southern European integration policies are more “bottom up.” In some SIRIUS countries, the integration programme is only available to newly arrived refugees. Integration programme job matching and career counselling services sometimes push migrants and refugees to jobs deemed low status (such as cleaning and driving), or which are otherwise perceived as suitable for non-natives (such as health care). The trend is that not attending integration training can affect eligibility for social benefits, but not residence permits, citizenship and family reunification. MLI policy in many countries is a discursive battleground, reflecting the political contentiousness of migration as a topic. Integration is not a contained policy arena in its own right, but involves elements of human rights, labour rights, labour market policy and national competitiveness. The urgency of the refugee situation has put the efficiency and speed of integration measures under increased scrutiny.

Recommendations: Our main recommendations are that eligibility for MLI programmes be widened, and that asylum seekers might be made eligible. Where MLI programmes are under-resourced, they should receive an increased funding. There is a discussion in Finland, Denmark and Switzerland about reducing the duration of the integration programmes; there is not a clear consensus on whether this will produce better outcomes. Individualized integration plans are considered effective, and these may offer a better solution than rigidly designed programs, taking into account the needs of some MRAs for longer integration plans, and others for shorter ones. Recognition of prior home country education and experience, both in terms of formal recognition of certificates and employer recognition in recruiting should improve.
