



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



SIRIUS

Skills and Integration of Migrants,
Refugees and Asylum Applicants
in European Labour Markets

**MIGRANT LABOUR MARKET INTEGRATION
PROGRAMMES: POLICY LESSONS FROM THE SIRIUS
RESEARCH PROJECT**

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INTRODUCTION

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. The objectives of these migrant labour market integration (MLI) policies are 1) helping migrants to overcome handicaps and skill deficits to better succeed in host country labour markets 2) better matching migrants' characteristics to employer needs by, for example, training them or guiding them to labour shortage occupations. These policies tend to focus on giving migrants appropriate skills for the local job market (notably, language skills, but others as well), and sometimes providing work experience and job matching services. They differ from country to country, in terms of who is eligible, and what level of public resources are available. To assess how well labour market integration policies and services function and how they could be improved it is important to look how their goals are defined in discourse, how they affect the MRAs employment prospects, and how the implementers describe their functioning. We discussed with migrants about their experiences with these programmes, and interviewed experts and implementers. We also systematically combed texts produced by policy makers and other social actors, to identify best practices and policy dilemmas to further develop the integration policy framework.

Our research focuses on policies in seven European countries, namely the Czech Republic, Denmark, Greece, Finland, Italy, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. We refer to these herein as the SIRIUS countries. Besides these we also focus on EU political arenas. We thus present a wide variety of different national contexts and detail European Union specific policies and programs.

Labour market integration policies for migrants are usually centred around various active labour market policies (ALMPs), and integration training programmes. Integration training programmes, are generally offered to some migrants for a limited time period only. In the UK integration training is generally available for 5 years after migration, in Finland for 3 years (which can be extent to five), in Italy for 2 years (which can be extent to three), in Denmark for two years and in the Czech Republic for one year. In Switzerland, according to the new integration path implemented since 2018, integration training is organized in the framework of four courses which in total last a few days.

Similarly in Greece, the duration of the integration training is dependent on the duration of each course. ALMPs can be divided into services that are targeted at the general population and services targeted at migrants specifically. 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.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

In the SIRIUS countries, official integration training programs are usually managed by actors such as government institutions, municipalities, public employment services and other local authorities. Moreover, in most SIRIUS countries, NGOs have an important role in the implementation of integration policies and services. In Denmark, Finland and Switzerland, MLI policies can be characterized as “top-down”, with the basic framework set out by legislation, in Denmark and Finland, and by multi-stakeholder canton-level initiatives, in Switzerland. These policies are then implemented by bureaucracies, which may be national, municipal or cantons, who may engage other actors, such as NGOs and employers, to help. A common character of the Southern European integration policies has been that they have generally been elaborated from the bottom up. In Greece NGO's play a very significant role in the implementation of integration policy, while Italy' national policies suffer from a lack of central government funding, made worse by right-wing government cuts.

The effects of ALMP and integration training must be seen together with immigration policies, which seek to restrict or encourage migration, and thereby to influence characteristics of the pool of immigrants arriving. However, MLI policies and immigration policies are made with different goals in mind, and implemented by different sets of bureaucracies. Immigration policy is in large part concerned with policing and maintaining national security, which involves monitoring, and perhaps deporting. It is about determining whose presence is desired, according to some notion of the national interest. MLI policies are concerned with educating, advising and matching workers with jobs, which ideally, at least in part, takes into account the interests of the MRAs themselves in finding a job, as well as those of employers in finding good recruits, and governments, in reducing the welfare burden on public finances. Not surprisingly, as we see in the SIRIUS national reports, these two sets of policies work to cross-purposes, with, for example, employers being prevented from recruiting the workers they want, or with asylum-seekers forced into idleness while awaiting their asylum decisions.

The **main barriers to labour market integration** of migrants are similar across our sample of European countries (Denmark, Czech Republic, Finland, Greece, Italy, Switzerland and UK), 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, a general atmosphere of xenophobia in society and (perceived) cultural barriers. Although we find that the barriers are to some extent similar in each SIRIUS country, there are **variations from country to country in integration policies** targeted to combat these barriers:

- We find that the availability of services, the target groups of policies, and the level of resources available for programmes vary greatly between SIRIUS countries. In some countries, such as the Czech Republic, few services are available and in others such as Finland and Denmark many integration services are available and these are highly integrated into general welfare services and active labour market policies. The reason for this difference is in part just the general level of resources devoted to active labour market policies; if there are more resources for active labour market policy and social welfare generally, then there is more for MRAs as well. But political climate plays a role as well, with cuts to migrant-focused programmes sometimes inspired by anti-immigrant politics. This is particularly notable in Italy.

- In some of the SIRIUS countries the integration programme is only available to and targeted at newly arrived refugees. This is the case in the Czech Republic, Denmark and the UK. In Finland on the other hand, the integration training is targeted at all migrant job seekers, and eligibility is contingent only on the migrant or refugee being a job-seeker, rather than on the motive for migration. Similarly, also in Greece integration services offered at local offices called "Kentra Koinotitas" are targeted at various migrant populations and not only at refugees. In Switzerland integration training has traditionally only been available for those in the asylum process, but recently availability has been broadened in certain cantons and communes to other migrants as well.
- We find that across the SIRIUS countries, MLI programmes share common elements, including a strong emphasis on language classes. In most of the SIRIUS countries free of cost language courses are available for those migrants that take part in integration training. In Finland, for example language training takes up to 2/3 of the hours designated to integration training. MLI programmes generally also often offer civics courses familiarising immigrants with the receiving country's norms, history, values and cultural traditions, vocational training and labour market skills training. These tend to be common elements in the integration trainings of other (non-SIRIUS) countries as well.
- Usually, also job matching and career counselling services are offered as part of the integration programme. These services sometimes push migrants and refugees to jobs that are deemed low status (such as cleaning and driving), or which are otherwise perceived as suitable for non-natives (such as health care). We find that there is a tension between public policy goals of trying to push MRAs into work as quickly as possible, and finding jobs that match the ambitions and potential of individual MRAs. In some cases, there were also indications that employment services case workers undervalued MRAs potential to work in skilled jobs. In countries with strong active labour market policies, such as Finland, Denmark and Switzerland, the assistance was valued in some respects by the migrants, but also some degree of coercion was felt, in terms of being pushed into jobs deemed appropriate by case workers. This was particularly a problem in Denmark, where migrants felt the government's policy of 'jobs first' was pushing them into positions which did not reflect their education and skills. While some of this might reflect market demand for certain professions, which case workers are obliged to take into account, it might also indicate a need for training case workers to value migrant skills.
- In Finland and Denmark, there are well developed ALMP bureaucracies designed for job seeking citizens, and these also have a key role in providing employability services for migrants and refugees. Similarly, employment services programmes have a role in integration in the UK. As a result, trends impacting on the ALMP services generally also affect the services provided to migrants. One trend is a tendency toward making benefits contingent on compliance with the demands of the employment bureaucracy. In the SIRIUS countries, the general trend is that not attending integration training and/or not passing an integration test effects eligibility for social benefits, and not residence permits, citizenship and family reunification. For example, in Finland, a migrant's "integration" benefit can be reduced due to non-compliance. In Switzerland, since the beginning of 2019, requirements have tightened and the assessed level of integration can affect the renewal of residence permits, family reunification and even result in permit revocation. Also in Italy, non-compliant migrants can lose their residence permits. Performance in integration programmes is not commonly tested in SIRIUS countries. The only tests that are commonly used are the tests for acquiring citizenship, and these are for testing whether the citizenship applicant meets the language skills requirements for naturalization. In Denmark and Switzerland taking an integration test is also required for long-term/permanent residence permits.
- In both the interviews and the discourse analysis conducted in the SIRIUS parent countries, the desirability of shortening integration training programmes in order to encourage MRAs to enter into the job market more quickly is being debated. The rise in asylum applicants seems to have put the efficiency and speed of integration measures under scrutiny and pressure.

Also, some actors assert that it makes more sense to learn the language through engagement in the work setting, rather than via integration programme course work. However, in our national reports, we find that some MRAs complain that with language skills only at the A2 or B1 level, they can usually only work in unskilled positions. The Swiss report, for example, notes specifically that MRAs find it difficult to find language learning support at more advanced levels, and the integration programmes only are designed to raise their language skills to the A2 level. Similarly in the Finnish report, some interviewees note that it is difficult to find suitable language courses to reach professional proficiency.

- Recent asylum seeker inflows have put pressure on the capacity of integration services in some EU countries; European Union funded projects via, for example, AMIF (Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund); ESF (European Social Fund); and ERDF (European Regional Development Fund), have an important role in filling the resource gap.
- A common barrier across all SIRIUS countries was that foreign educational certificates tend not to be recognized. While there are mechanisms in place for foreign certificate recognition for EU member state nationals to promote intra-EU mobility, these principles are not systematically applied to third country nationals.

As regards to the **discourse analysis**, we find MLI policy in many countries as a discursive battleground, reflecting the political contentiousness of migration as a topic. Migration is not a contained policy arena in its own right, but also bringing in elements of human rights, labour rights, labour market policy and national competitiveness. Our discourse analysis reveals all these elements coming into play, although which elements are emphasized depends very much on the positioning and messaging of the actor in question. We find that:

- Overall, among the discourses in various SIRIUS countries, a general consensus can be noted according to which labour market integration is seen as a key dimension, on which other forms of integration depend. Moreover, except in the Czech Republic, there was at least some degree of consensus around the desirability of providing language and other MLI training to migrants.
- The discourse analysis makes clear however that not all SIRIUS countries share the same policy goals in regards to migrant integration. In, for example, the Czech Republic, the notion that migrant integration is an appropriate area for public investment is contested. Dominant actors such as the government and employers take a shorter-term perspective, considering migrant labour as an exploitable resource. Similarly, there is a strong emphasis from the UK government on “deserving” migrants who presumably bring skills and entrepreneurship, but who do not require public support or resources: this perspective is not shared by other UK actors such as employers’ organisations and unions. Moreover, in Denmark, the entire need to integrate all migrants is contested by the Danish People’s Party, which frames integration as a goal only for some migrants: asylum seekers, refugees and family migrants sponsored by refugees are expected to stay in Denmark only temporarily, which is, according to the People’s Party, why they should not be integrated.
- Another interesting finding is that The European Union is not prominent in any of the national level discourses in the SIRIUS countries. The EU has a role in providing funding for migrant integration projects; this funding stream is important in Greece and the Czech Republic where local resources are insufficient. We thus find a discrepancy between the role of the EU in providing integration resources, and national discussions which do not acknowledge this role.
- Distinctly, the asylum and refugee situation in European countries has been the most pressing and current migrant-related topic now for several years. The focus of policy makers and implementers has been on dealing with the situation at hand, which is also illustrated in the discourse that they produce. Discourse regarding the increase of asylum applicants and the challenges this poses has in many ways overridden other migration issues on the agenda.

Thus, immediate reception of asylum seekers is more discussed than, for example, the integration of refugee, let alone labour migrants.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above ascribed analysis and findings our main policy implications and recommendations are related to the widening of eligibility of MLI programmes, the duration of integration programmes and the improvement of recognition and utilizing of migrant skills and qualifications:

- **Where MLI programmes are under-resourced, they should receive an increased level of funding.** There is a consensus among implementers, beneficiaries and most policy makers, that MLI programmes result in improved labour market outcomes for MRAs. This is also substantiated in the research. In some countries, particularly UK, Italy, Greece and the Czech Republic, the public resources devoted to these programmes is minimal. EU funding has an important role where there are few public resources and increasing this funding might help to circumvent or overcome the reluctance of anti-migration governments to provide these services.
- **In general, the eligibility of specific migrant groups to participate in MLI programmes should be expanded.** The eligibility varies from country to country, as do the availability of specific services. In some countries, such as the Czech Republic and Denmark programmes are mainly offered to newly arrived refugees, while in others such as in Finland and in Greece they are offered to all job seeking migrants. In the UK, programmes are only offered to resettled refugees, which have been chosen in collaboration with the UN. Groups that could be included are:
 - Asylum seekers, who have not yet received their asylum decision. Because of the long wait for asylum decisions in many countries, extending eligibility for these programs for to asylum seekers with good prospects for a positive decision might allow more rapid integration, reducing the burden on public finances
 - Economic migrants: although they already have work, and do not necessarily have time to engage in integration training, many would like better access to language training, which would allow them better job opportunities
 - Parents who are caring for children sometimes miss out on integration programmes because they are not in the job market during their eligibility period, or do not have the time. More flexibility in the organization of the programs, or in the eligibility period, might improve access for this group.
- **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.** In particular, language learning is a part of these programmes highly valued by migrants. However, language learning takes a long time, and there are active policy discussions in many places about pushing migrants to go to work quickly, before their language skills are well developed. In countries with well-structured integration training programmes, there is a push to shorten these, and push migrants and refugees into jobs as quickly as possible. This may be at the cost of pushing well-qualified migrants and refugees into unqualified positions. **Denmark's relatively rigid "job first" is poorly considered.** It also highlights the problem, also seen in Finland, of case workers not giving due consideration the qualifications and aspirations of migrants and refugees in recommending placements.
- **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. These, however, assume a capable public service bureaucracy with enough case workers to handle the workload.

- **Recognition of prior home country education and experience, both in terms of formal recognition of certificates and employer recognition in recruiting should improve.** Visible in all the SIRIUS countries, was a perceived need by migrants to start their education from the beginning again, because of a devaluing of foreign qualifications. More should be done to convert foreign qualifications into domestic equivalents, and to promote to employers the value of these qualifications. Programs at education institutions designed to bring foreign qualifications up to local standards should be considered. Standardized EU policies such as EQF for certificate recognition should also be considered for third country nationals.
- **Coercive elements to ensure compliance with integration plans do not seem to be problem, but neither are they useful.** The MRAs interviewed in this project tended to value MLI programmes, and did not require the threat of benefit cuts, or other coercion to participate. On the other hand, there was no evidence the existence of these coercive elements is a problem.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

The **SIRIUS research project** looks at the enablers and barriers of labour market integration of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Our research is organized into several work packages, and this report details the findings of the third work package, building on our previous research in work packages one and two: Work package one analyses the labour market position of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in the SIRIUS countries. Work package two details the legal frameworks of each SIRIUS partner country relevant to inhibiting or enabling integration. Work package three focuses on migrant labour market integration (MLI) policies and services

The research of this **work package was divided into two main tasks** which are a) policy discourse analysis and B) assessment of existing policies and their outcomes. The research was conducted between September 2018 and March 2019 according to a similar protocol in each SIRIUS country.

- A) As part of the work package, a **policy discourse analysis** was conducted by the SIRIUS national teams, to identify and analyse how issues of labour market integration are discussed by policy-makers and policy actors. They also conducted a discourse/framing analysis of texts selected from the websites of these actors; the exact number of texts varied from country to country, but was generally in the hundreds. By analysing the findings of the discourse analysis together with the assessment of policies, which forms the second part of the work package, we evaluate the consistency between policy rhetoric and policy goals.
- B) The second part of the work package consists of a **policy assessment** in which the barriers to labour market integration and existing policies to remedy them are identified, categorised and evaluated. This was performed using a meta-analysis of the existing national literatures, and interviews with policy experts, implementers, and beneficiaries of MLI policies. Each team interviewed about 20 MRA program beneficiaries, and about 15 stakeholders. Overall we realised about 245 interviews for this specific research task.

PROJECT IDENTITY

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FURTHER READING

WP1 Report – Labour Market Barriers and Enablers – Comparative report on the position of post-2014 migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in the labour market (available on <https://www.sirius-project.eu/publications>)

WP2 Report – Legal Barriers and Enablers – Comparative report on the legal, institutional and socio-cultural analysis (available on <https://www.sirius-project.eu/publications>)

WP3 Report – Policy Barriers and Enablers (available on <https://www.sirius-project.eu/publications>)