

English summary
of Fafo-rapport 2020:16

**“We have kept
the wheels in motion”**

The municipalities’
integration work with
refugees during the outbreak
of the coronavirus

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This report establishes an initial overview of the way in which Norwegian municipalities addressed their responsibility for providing training for participants in the introduction programme for immigrants during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in Norway. Our ambition has been to provide an overview of how the lockdown that started on 12 March affected the municipalities’ efforts, and to describe some of the solutions that were devised to address the challenges caused by the lockdown. The data material consists of qualitative interviews with local managers and staff members, as well as an online survey among those responsible for the introduction programme in 141 municipalities.

The majority of the municipalities report that Norwegian language training, primary and secondary schooling and practical language and vocational training for the participants in the introduction programme have been reduced in both scope and quality. The reduced access to training programmes and transition to more use of digital services by the municipal Norwegian language teaching services have especially impacted those with least resources in the form of previous education and digital skills. The municipalities are concerned that service provision has functioned poorly during this period for those who need most help with language learning. The implementation of language practice and work placement has proven especially difficult. In most of the municipalities, these services have been fully or partly discontinued during the period in question. For participants in primary, lower secondary and upper secondary schooling, the services have been maintained, albeit to a reduced extent. However, those municipalities that claim that the quality of these services has declined outnumber those claiming that the quality has remained largely unchanged.

When COVID-19 closed down schools, kindergartens and workplaces, it quickly became clear that the training activities under the introduction programme could not continue as usual, and the question of how this should be addressed came up. How should the municipalities handle the participants’ absence administratively, if it was caused by a full or partial halt to the training programme? This question is important, because the municipalities’ practices in this area have a direct bearing on the overall scope of the introduction programme provided to the participants. Varying practices in the handling of absence and reduced or non-provision

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of the programme will violate the principle of equal treatment. The survey suggests that approximately one in every two municipalities have faced problems in understanding and using the regulations on registration of absence among their participants. These challenges have arisen mainly because the municipalities find the regulations hard to interpret, and that registration of absence is complicated given the type of alternative training provided during the period of lockdown. Moreover, the municipalities are concerned about reduced quality and learning outcome. We may assume that the municipalities have varied in their practices, both in terms of granting extensions of the programme because of a reduction in the scope of its provision and in terms of registering non-permissible absence within the framework that has existed during the period that the programme has operated at a reduced level.

Increased use of digital platforms was quickly identified as a method for maintaining contact with the participants during the lockdown and undertaking a certain amount of teaching. However, poor digital infrastructure constitutes a challenge for the employees of nearly four of every ten municipalities and for the participants in nearly eight of every ten municipalities. However, the COVID-19 pandemic spurred a far greater number of municipalities to switch to digital platforms for their follow-up and training services. Many have made an impressive effort, in terms of learning new working methods and establishing new models for staying in touch with participants.

Digitalisation represents new opportunities with regard to the introduction programme, in terms of an increased differentiation of the service, new learning methods, and follow-up of participants who are on leave from the programme. Many municipalities report a wish to continue this approach. Furthermore, the survey shows clearly that the employees are also concerned about the effect of the transition to digital follow-up and training and how this has functioned for those who had the least favourable starting point. Digital platforms can function well as an arena to maintain social contact, respond to specific questions and communicate basic information. Using them as a learning arena for those among the participants with little previous schooling will entail far greater challenges. There are therefore grounds to caution against a further digitalisation of the training programmes, unless these take into account that the participants will vary in their ability to benefit from this form of training. Given the fact that many participants in the introduction programme have little education and limited experience of independent learning in a school setting, the digitised programmes will require comprehensive teacher support.