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More tailored training and less local variation?

Outcomes of standardised elements in the introduction programme
for recently arrived refugees





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The introduction programme for recently arrived refugees aims to help participants learn Norwegian, qualify for work or education, and become active citizens. Nevertheless, the programme has been criticised for lacking sufficient differentiation and for the varied provision across municipalities. In response to this, the Solberg government initiated efforts to develop standardised elements, intended to provide local authorities with a tool to improve the quality and individual adaptation of the programme. These measures were implemented in 2021, partly as new mandatory components for introduction programme participants, and partly as recommendations, guidance and tools for staff in refugee services, adult education centres and their collaboration partners, via the Resource Centre (*Fagressursen*) website. Fafo has been monitoring the implementation and impact of the measures since their introduction, and this final report analyses whether the measures have led to more individual differentiation in programmes and reduced quality disparities between municipalities, in line with the objectives.

It is methodologically challenging to assess the impact of a resource that local authorities can choose whether, when and how to use. This problem is also compounded by the major structural changes that have affected local authorities' capacity in the introduction programme. Since 2021, several legislative changes have influenced the degree of differentiation in the introduction programme. In addition, there has been a significant change in both the size and composition of the target group, along with a major scaling up of local integration efforts following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Many more municipalities are now accepting refugees, and these tend to be smaller and more remote than previously. Both the participants and the refugee services have changed since the introduction of the standardised elements.

The analysis is built around two key dimensions: individual differentiation and quality harmonisation. The former refers to the extent to which the content of the introduction programme is adapted to participants' different aptitudes and goals. The latter refers to whether all local authorities offer an introduction programme with high-quality content, less variation in the tools used and quality. The report is based on qualitative interviews with participants in the introduction programme and municipal employees, as well as analyses of registry data and repeated surveys. Its aim is to shed light on how local authorities' practices have changed following the introduction of the standardised elements.

One of the main conclusions is that the introduction of standardised elements has improved quality in some areas, but that there has been little harmonisation between local authorities, which was an explicit goal. On the contrary, the variation in programme provision and practices has increased in some cases, particularly since 2022, when the number of resettled refugees rose and many new municipalities became involved. The content of the introduction programme has also not been more tailored to the wide range of participants' differing aptitudes. Instead, Norwegian language training, work placements and other parts of the programme are now seen as better tailored to the majority group after 2022, namely participants with existing qualifications and a short programme duration. Meanwhile, a decrease was observed after 2021 in the share of

participants enrolled in employment or education-oriented measures, which indicates less, rather than more, targeted content in the programme.

Many things are beyond the participants' control

Based on interviews and data from the user survey conducted by the Directorate of Integration and Diversity (IMDi), we examined the factors that led participants to perceive their qualification pathways as good quality, relevant, motivational and tailored to their individual aptitudes. Many participants feel that the programme is, to some extent, tailored to their background and goals, shaped through individual plans and dialogue with advisors. However, participants describe how their participation in the programme is often characterised by limited agency and predictability. Although participants have goals and ambitions, what they end up receiving is often shaped by external factors, such as access to work placements, Norway's recognition of prior education, and the availability of Norwegian language training. Attempts to tailor the programme are constrained by capacity, cooperation and structural frameworks.

In interviews, participants expressed a strong desire for work placements in order to learn Norwegian and gain employment experience. However, opportunities are often limited due to a lack of language skills and/or a shortage of suitable placements. Many report that the placements they are offered are not necessarily relevant to their skills or goals, but they accept them nonetheless so that they can practise their Norwegian. As for the new mandatory components, participants consistently describe the parental guidance as relevant and useful, but they have more difficulty articulating the benefits of the *Coping with Life in a New Country* course in ways that align with the authorities' ambitions for this element.

Norwegian language training is highlighted as the most central element of the programme, but experiences here are also mixed. Participants with a higher education are more likely to experience progress and to have some influence over the content and level of instruction. In contrast, those with little or no prior education describe the language training as not well tailored to them, overly theoretical and lacking practical orientation. The participants who struggle the most are those with a low level of education; although they are given longer programmes, they do not have access to work placements due to their inadequate proficiency in the Norwegian language.

Lack of targeted programme content

The analyses of registry data show that almost all participants receive instruction in Norwegian language and social studies, while measures related to employment and education are offered more selectively and less frequently than expected. According to the new Integration Act, all participants should have a final goal of either employment or education, and the content of their programme should be aligned with this goal. The introduction of standardised elements was intended to support this. However, we find that even among participants with employment as their explicit final goal, many are not offered employment-oriented measures. Those who are, however, are more likely to find a job, according to the reasons given for completing the programme. This may indicate that employment orientation in the programme is successful, but it could also reflect a tendency to prioritise participants who are already well-equipped to enter the labour

market, or that these participants can more easily access employment-related measures.

Younger participants without a higher education are more likely to be offered education-oriented measures, especially in relation to lower secondary education. However, overall, education is a less common final goal among the participants analysed after 2021, likely due to the fact that many of those with longer, education-focused programmes are excluded from our data. This is because our analysis is limited to those who completed the programme by the end of 2023, and education-oriented measures can take longer.

An important finding is that fewer participants have taken part in employment-oriented measures following the introduction of the new law and the standardised elements in 2021, even compared with the cohort that participated in the period 2015–2018, during the previous refugee crisis. Why this is the case and whether this pattern will continue requires further investigation. This finding may be related to pandemic restrictions in 2021 or capacity challenges after 2022, and because it is easier to scale up Norwegian language training than, for example, work placements. It may also indicate a more enduring shift resulting from the new Integration Act guidelines on programme duration, Norwegian language training and final goals, leading local authorities to reprioritise.

Resource Centre – known but seldom used for individual adaptation

The standardised elements were developed as part of an effort to reduce municipal disparities in programme content and to strengthen local authorities' ability to tailor the programme to individual participants. The Resource Centre was launched as a platform to gather knowledge and provide guidance. The evaluation shows that the tool is well known and considered useful, but primarily as a source of reference in times of change, for the development of new measures and for questions about regulations. It is used much less in the daily work of individual follow-up and planning.

Many local authorities also find that the Resource Centre is too general and insufficiently adapted to local conditions. The content often requires considerable modifications before it can be used. A need was identified for more practice-oriented, specific and fully developed materials, in addition to more resources that can support staff's professional development. Use is also lower in new settlement municipalities, which have less local experience to draw on, i.e. local authorities that the tool was specifically designed to support.

The Resource Centre's potential as a quality harmonisation tool is therefore far from being realised. The local authorities that already have a high level of expertise and a large capacity are also those that use the Resource Centre the most, potentially reinforcing rather than reducing the variation between municipalities.

Variation between municipalities continues

The evaluation shows that local authorities' capacity, experience and geographic location still play a decisive role in the programme provision. Experienced, centrally located municipalities have a wider range of measures, and tend to view them as more effective and adhere more closely to the Resource Centre's recommendations. New and more

remote municipalities often have a more limited provision and themselves consider many of the measures less effective than more central and established settlement municipalities. Norwegian language training and work placement models are still subject to considerable variation across municipalities, depending on their centrality and experience.

We have also observed that the local adult education options are varied and an important factor. Limited access to tailored Norwegian language training, job and work placement opportunities and adult education for adults at lower and upper secondary level poses significant challenges in providing education that supports the introduction programme reform's focus on formal qualifications, particularly for new and remote settlement municipalities. Conversely, programme advisors indicate that the more firmly the qualification pathway is embedded within established municipal frameworks and collaborative efforts, the easier it is for them to facilitate a suitable pathway. Measures such as lower secondary education through Preparatory Education for Adults (FOV), modular lower secondary education and the opportunity for recognition of prior learning in individual subjects are highlighted as important tools for tailoring pathways that lead to formal qualifications.

Meanwhile, new settlement municipalities report better access to work placements than the more established municipalities. They consider their placement measures effective, but are less likely to follow the Resource Centre's recommendations for quality assurance, such as cooperation with employers and targeted learning content.

The mandatory standardised component 'parental guidance' has been effectively implemented as of 2024, including in most of the new settlement municipalities. This is likely because the measure is clearly defined and mandatory, with access to established methodology and training for advisors, while also allowing local authorities considerable flexibility in how much time they choose to invest in the measure. Other measures, such as the *Coping with Life in a New Country* course and digital skills training, are far less widespread, particularly in new and more remote municipalities. This is partly because digital skills training is based on assessed need, and that the *Coping with Life* course is not mandatory for participants with temporary collective protection, many of whom are in new settlement municipalities. We also found that some local authorities not required to offer the *Coping with Life* course do so anyway, while others that are required do not. This prioritisation is made at the municipal level, independent of national laws and regulations.

In summary, the variation in measures offered by local authorities continues to mirror familiar dividing lines between new and established, large and small, and central and remote municipalities. The introduction of standardised elements has not managed to change this situation.

Cooperation – still fragmented

A prerequisite for the programme to function as a comprehensive and targeted qualification pathway is close cooperation between the key parties: the refugee service, NAV (the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration), adult education centres and

employers. One of the goals of introducing standardised elements was to strengthen this cooperation, but cross-sector cooperation remains a weak link, particularly in new municipalities.

Since 2021, many local authorities' cooperation with NAV and employers has deteriorated, and building partnerships takes time. There were some signs of improvement between 2023 and 2024, but cooperation is still poorer than in 2021.

Many local authorities work with NAV on employment-oriented measures, and on education-oriented measures to a lesser extent. This cooperation takes place through routines such as transfer meetings, cooperation agreements, management meetings and knowledge sharing, all of which are also recommended in the Resource Centre's guidelines. However, 'new' municipalities are much less likely to have such routines in place, particularly where the Resource Centre has not been utilised. This may be because use of the Resource Centre is linked to closer cooperation between the local authority and NAV, or because those with good cooperation routines are also more likely to use tools like the Resource Centre.

The cooperation on Norwegian language training has been more stable. There has also been an increase in cooperation between local authorities and private course providers, which may reflect a response to capacity challenges. The dialogue between Norwegian language teachers and programme advisors has improved, but is still better among established municipalities.

Conclusion

The introduction programme has ambitious goals: it is intended to provide new refugees with a solid foundation for active participation in society through individually tailored and comprehensive qualification pathways. The introduction of standardised elements and the development of the Resource Centre were intended to help better realise these goals. The evaluation shows that some improvements have been made, particularly for participants with a higher education and in local authorities with good capacity and experience. The introduction of parental guidance has also been a success. However, disparities remain in the measures available in municipalities, and individual tailoring is still a challenge, especially for those with the greatest barriers to participation.

When assessing the effectiveness of the standardised elements, it is also important to consider the major role that the increased refugee influx and changed settlement patterns after 2022 have played. This has placed additional pressure on municipalities that were already accepting refugees and led to the introduction of new settlement municipalities. These developments have made it more difficult to reduce disparities across municipalities in the measures provided. Meanwhile, the increase in participants with a short programme duration has led to a shift in focus toward this group, rather than toward greater differentiation of measures based on participants' varying needs.

The principle of municipal self-governance plays a key role in Norwegian integration policy, including how Norwegian language training and the introduction programme are organised and delivered at the local level. The standardised elements of the introduction programme were presented as guidance and recommendations in order to respect local

authorities' agency and autonomy. The dilemma is that dispersed settlement and broad municipal autonomy come at the expense of participants' opportunities, as their access to relevant, tailored training remains dependent on where they live. Advice and guidance have not been sufficient to compensate for this.

To make the introduction programme more tailored and ensure equal access, enhanced efforts are required: more strategic refugee settlement planning, more targeted support for under-resourced local authorities, more practical tools and a firm commitment to cross-sector cooperation as an obligatory practice – not merely an aspiration. Future actions by national authorities to enhance the quality and adaptability of the introduction programme must fully protect participants' rights to access a programme that meets statutory requirements, regardless of who they are or where they live.

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