

Integration Exchange: Online integration services of third country nationals
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Integration Programmes for Newcomers in Europe – Achievements and Challenges

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Since the end of the 1990s, several Northwestern European countries with a strong welfare state¹ have set up programs to promote the quick integration of legal newcomers. These programmes mainly consist of obligatory language and civic education courses but, according to the country, they vary in size and content. The programmes are obligatory and non-compliance can result either in financial sanctions or in sanctions related to the access to permanent residence. The programmes' major political objective is to let newly arrived (and also settled) immigrants acquire a level of language skills that allows them to integrate the national labour market. These programmes focus especially on family migrants who represent the major category of new immigrants in these countries and who are said to be rather low skilled.

The Netherlands were the first country in Europe to introduce such an obligatory integration programme in 1998. This Dutch programme quickly became a model for other European countries such as France and Germany, also because of an enhanced European exchange and dialogue on integration.² Astonishing however was, that, while other European countries introduced a programme copied on the Dutch model, the Netherlands decided to abandon their programme.

Indeed, a combination of different factors explains this drastic change in Dutch integration policies: a first and very important element was a new government that arrived in power in 2003, strongly influenced by (economic) liberalism and that pushed for a smaller (welfare-) state and a stronger civic engagement. A second reason was that evaluations of the initial integration programme published in 2002 had shown that mainly skilled migrants made a good progress in Dutch language learning when participating in the programme while the majority of (rather unskilled) participants only made a (very) small progress. Because of these evaluation results, it became clear that state-financed and state-organised programmes for making migrants fit for the labour market by increasing their human capital are a fastidious, time and money consuming task

¹ Among them are the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Flanders (Belgium), France and Austria. Norway disposes of a comparable programme while the Swedish programme does not include any obligation and sanctions.

² For example, the European Commission initiated the so-called network of national contact points on integration that, in cooperation with a Brussels-based think-tank (*Migration Policy Group*), edited the European Handbook on Integration that among other things gives advice on integration programmes and language courses for migrants.

especially if the migrants are low-skilled. The conservative-liberal government Balkenende III reacted to these evaluation results by proposing an alternative policy approach that a) focuses more on the immigrant's own contribution to integration than on the state's contribution and b) tries to select better skilled and better motivated immigrants even before they immigrate to the Netherlands through so-called integration tests for family migrants in their country of origin.

Once again, the Dutch approach has received a lot of interest abroad and countries such as Germany (where the evaluation of the integration programme has delivered results very much comparable to the Dutch ones) have also introduced language tests in the immigrant's country of origin. This change in policy strategy raises several questions:

- If the programmes' effectiveness with regard to the objective of increasing the migrant's chances on the labour market through improving his or her language skills is limited, what are the effects of the programmes?
- State-run integration programmes for migrants are a very explicit form of state engagement into fostering immigrant integration. The former Dutch government Balkenende III has tried to abandon this programme and shift (inter alia financial) responsibility for integration from the state to the individual migrant. The current Dutch government Balkenende IV (conservative / social-democrats) has just revised this legislation and returned to the social-policy-logic of the late 1990s. Still the question remains whether in principle it is possible for a liberal democratic welfare state to completely abandon state-run measures for integration and to turn integration (or rather: the acquisition of integration-relevant skills) into a private task, leaving it to the market rather than to the state?
- And finally the question whether the best way to increase migrants' labour market participation is the introduction of a skilled-migration scheme?