

A chance to qualify – experiences with the introductory programme for refugees

This report presents the results from a qualitative user survey among participants in the introductory programme for refugees in Norway. The objective of the study has been to show the range of opportunities, strategies and experiences reported by the participants and point out factors that they highlight as motivating for learning Norwegian and improving their qualifications for the Norwegian labour market. The report does not aim to describe which experiences are more common, but we hope it will provide a better understanding of how participants from a diverse range of backgrounds experience the introductory programme and how it works for them. The report is based on interviews with 38 programme participants and nine teachers, programme advisors and principals in four municipalities in the eastern, western and northern regions of Norway. The following is a brief summary of our main conclusions.

Individual adaptation, programme advisors and user co-determination

When refugees who have been granted protection in Norway make plans for their future in Norway, they need considerable advice and guidance. They need someone to tell them what is possible in Norway and help them develop appropriate strategies. Thus, programme advisors in the introductory programme for refugees have a potentially very important role. This study shows, however, that the programme advisors are important actors that may influence the strategies the participants choose for qualifying for the Norwegian labour market. There is major variation in the extent to which the programme advisors offers participants courses that they experience as meaningful or motivating, and whether participants feel that they can shape the program contents. This may be due to variation in programme advisors' opportunities to design an individually adapted programme for each participant, which are shaped by local conditions, whether relevant options are available in the municipality, and whether the programme advisor has sufficient information and resources to make these available for his/her participants.

Participants in the introductory programme are entitled to a programme content that is adapted to each individual based on their background, skills, need for qualification and own ambitions. In light of this requirement, we

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found a *striking lack of variation* in participants' programme content in the municipalities that we visited. Even though participants may each have individual plans, this does not necessarily mean that they have individually adapted introductory programmes. There are several reasons for this.

In some municipalities, there are *few training courses and educational opportunities* to choose from locally. Participants report that in general, they attend training courses provided through the local school for adult education. In the municipalities we have visited, the schools for adult education have been delegated responsibility for offering Norwegian language courses, social studies classes, and for providing primary/lower secondary education to adult refugees. Norwegian language and social studies courses are mandatory for participants in the introductory programme, but beyond this there is great variation in what kind of opportunities for qualification that exist or are made available to the participants locally. The *options for qualification* made available to the participants will have an impact on what sectors of the labour market they can aim for.

Some participants who have no approved education from their country of origin, may wish to obtain formal qualifications that count in the Norwegian labour market. This might be short training courses that do not require primary/lower secondary education or vocational training at the upper secondary level. Others may aim to meet the general admission requirements for higher education in Norway in order to get an academic degree. For participants who envisaged such educational pathways it was essential to have a programme advisor who could tell them how such ambitions could be realised and was willing to adapt the programme content to accommodate such expectations.

There is a tendency for the individual programme plans described to us to have a relatively *low level of ambition* on behalf of the participants. We have talked to ambitious participants who are eager to learn and who have higher education or vocational training from their countries of origin, but whose introductory programme plan is only to learn Norwegian and be on work placement in companies that mainly hire unskilled labour.

The municipalities we have visited largely appear to comply with the requirement to provide the participants with a *full-day programme*. Given that the municipalities have limited resources available for the introductory scheme, the full-day programme is not necessarily filled with relevant and facilitated content. In several municipalities, the participants report that some of the course content is the same for all participants, irrespective of Norwegian language skills, time of residence or prior education. Such sessions were frequently described as not very motivating and as a 'waste of

time', both by those who had a higher educational background and by those with little previous education, who were often unable to benefit from the instruction. We have also met participants who had been obligated to take the same training course twice, or who had been placed on training courses that were so difficult in terms of language that they had failed to understand anything, and who claimed that this happened because their programme advisor needed to fill their timesheets.

As a result, some participants feel that the full-day programme they are provided with through the introductory programme is less than meaningful and brings little in terms of qualification. Those who perceive the programme in this way are also the most frustrated among our respondents. Some felt that their programme advisors and teachers forced them to attend courses that in their opinion brought them little benefit, and they saw this as *degrading* and demotivating for learning. In contrast, we found examples of participants who could spend their time in the introductory programme on educational activities adapted to their level and in line with their own interests and ambitions, progressing at their own speed. There are numerous routes to benefiting from the introductory programme, but for the participants, individual adaptation seem to be the key to success.

Training in Norwegian language and social studies

The participants whom we met through this study often highlighted the Norwegian language training component of the introductory programme as extremely important to them; they are aware of how language skills are key to getting to know Norwegians, finding a job and orienting themselves in society. As a result, the participants see the time spent in the introductory programme, with financial support and professional Norwegian language instructors, as a valuable resource from which they seek to obtain maximum benefit. Many participants also report to have obtained a lot of benefit from the instruction, with language teachers that have provided them with high-quality individual feedback, or that the teaching at the primary/lower secondary level has constituted a meaningful full-day activity with ample language learning.

On the other hand, a number of participants felt that the training situation was not well adapted to their learning needs. Some felt that the instruction was far too difficult, others found that it was all too easy or progressed too slowly. This would often be a result of attending classes with too wide a variation in the participants' skills, progression and learning background. One municipality had only two Norwegian language classes. Large variation

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in participants' educational background and skill level in classes has consequences for the learning outcome and motivation of the students, both among students with weak and strong preconditions for learning a new language. Participants from several municipalities felt that insufficient adaptation of the teaching caused them to waste valuable time. Students who are accustomed to learning tend to complain about having to waste valuable time they could have spent studying Norwegian on their own to pass the required examinations. Students with less experience of schooling describe class situations with little learning outcome, and that they have few alternative strategies for learning Norwegian. Some participants with little education from their country of origin and limited Norwegian language skills perceive the school situation as highly demanding because all instruction is in Norwegian. This barrier is exacerbated if they are allocated to a class with much variation in students' prior education, and where they are unable to grasp what is being said.

Mixed classes can also represent a problem for people with higher education and high ambitions. They may perceive poorly facilitated learning situations with slow progression as frustrating, because this slows them down. For participants who wish to proceed to higher education in Norway or return to a skilled profession, it is especially important to reach a high level of Norwegian language proficiency in the course of the two years that they have available through the introductory programme. This will require instruction with a more rapid progression than most of the other groups in the introductory programme are able to or want to attend.

The participants were generally very satisfied with the social studies courses provided through the introductory programme. This instruction provides knowledge about laws and regulations, key institutions and Norwegian society in the past and present, and the participants feel that this is relevant and useful. Especially participants with poor Norwegian language skills, little education from their countries of origin and less ability to identify this information on their own found that this instruction made them better equipped for life in Norway. Because the information provided by this training course is important to the participants, some are also concerned that it should be made available as early as possible.

Qualification through work placement

In addition to training courses that give formal qualifications, work placement is frequently used in the introductory programme, both for language training and as informal qualification for the labour market. The success

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stories show that work placement can be a beneficial and motivating arena for language training, an important opportunity to become acquainted with Norwegian working life and a gateway to gainful employment of major importance to the participants. On the other hand, the participants do not invariably feel that the work placement options they have been offered match their needs and expectations.

Most often, the participants will have one of two different sets of expectations. They would either like a work placement option that provides them with an opportunity to learn Norwegian, or an opportunity to demonstrate their skills to a potential employer. Only a few work placement options appear to combine these two opportunities. However, the intention behind a particular work placement is not always clear for the participant, and this gives rise to a lot of frustration.

Those who expect to be able to practise and learn Norwegian will be frustrated if their work placement is in a warehouse where English is the working language or where they spend most of the day on their own. Others request work placement because they would like to demonstrate their skills to an employer in the hope of being offered a job, and will be frustrated if their work placement period is spent in a company where there are no such prospects. In addition, some work placements offer no opportunities for practising Norwegian, nor any prospects of a part-time job. There are nevertheless reports of participants who have needed to renew their work placement contracts with such workplaces. The participants call for work placement opportunities that provide real benefit and meet their need for learning the language or finding a job, and they want protection against being exploited as unpaid labour without obtaining any benefit in return.

Some participants report that they have been exploited during their work placement period by being asked to do extra work for no pay, in return for (broken) promises of being hired later on. Such exploitation is felt as demotivating and degrading, and as a waste of valuable time in the introductory programme.

For some, work placement provides an opportunity to get a part-time job. Those of our interviewees who found a job through their work placement entered jobs as on-call temps, part-time employees without a fixed work schedule, short-hours temporary workers or similar positions. Such supplementary income is important to the participants, especially with regard to an application for a permanent residence permit, but the opportunities for further mobility are uncertain.

One of the reasons why the participants are eager to find a job quickly during the introductory programme is related to the income requirement

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defined by the authorities as a condition for granting a permanent residence permit. For the participants, obtaining a permanent residence permit is a matter of ensuring predictability and security. Some participants therefore report that they spend their time in the introductory programme looking for a part-time job in the unskilled labour market, since it is easier to achieve the income limit during their time in the programme than later. The need to earn extra income becomes a priority that for some participants displaces other, more long-term objectives, such as achieving a good level of Norwegian or upgrading their vocational qualifications. Because they consider work placement an opportunity to demonstrate their skills to a potential employer, they instead spend their time in the introductory programme on repeated work placement periods that may provide little benefit, in search of an employer that will offer them a job.