

Reframing Integration

The Impact of residence categorisation on labour market opportunities for migrants

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Why this paper?

Across European labour markets, newcomers are often not assessed on their skills or motivation, but on their residence status. This status determines access to services, rights, and support—long before individuals reach the labour market. Our paper explores how this policy-based categorisation leads to early segmentation and exclusion, resulting in wasted talent and systemic inequality.

Approach and methodology

The analysis draws on eight years of research conducted by OpenEmbassy, based on 25 practice-oriented studies commissioned by Dutch municipalities, ministries, and NGOs. These studies, which include participatory research, interviews, action research and surveys, were re-analysed using the Indicators of Integration model developed by Ager & Strang. The paper identifies recurring themes and structural patterns that shape how newcomers experience the integration system—with a focus on labour market access.

Key Insights

- ✓ Labour market segmentation begins in policy, not at the workplace.
- ✓ Residence status determines the type and timing of support people receive.
- ✓ This leads to unequal access to work, even with similar potential or skills.
- ✓ Institutions can unintentionally reproduce inequality through category-based systems.
- ✓ An alternative: design integration pathways based on future orientation and capacity—not labels.

Implications for labour market institutions

Municipalities, public agencies and employers all operate within systems that categorise newcomers based on residence status. This process shapes support trajectories and limits flexibility. Our paper argues for a shift towards person-centred, parallel integration pathways, designed around individual needs, capacities and future perspectives. Such an approach could support more inclusive and efficient access to work.

Let's connect

We welcome feedback, collaboration and opportunities to publish a further developed version of this paper.

→ Full version available upon request

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