

Research Perspective Integration Programme Participants

Results 2023–2024 (second report)

Summary B1

Why this research?

The new Integration Act 2021 (Wi2021) came into force on 1 January 2022. This Act replaces the old Integration Act 2013 (Wi2013). The aim of the Wi2021 is to enable integration programme participants to participate fully and quickly in Dutch society, preferably through paid work. Municipalities have been given a greater role and can offer more tailor-made solutions.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment wants to know what immigrants' experiences are with these two Acts. That is why a large-scale study has been launched into the experiences of immigrants. This study is being conducted by Regioplan, OpenEmbassy and BMC. The study will run until 2027.

How did we conduct the study?

The study consisted of an online questionnaire and interviews with integration programme participants. More than 4,000 people completed the questionnaire. These were both asylum seekers and family migrants. We spoke to people who fall under the Wi2021 and people who still fall under the Wi2013. The questionnaires were available in five languages so that everyone could participate. With this broad approach, we wanted to understand the experiences of as many groups as possible. However, not many integration programme participants with little education completed the questionnaire.

What did we investigate?

We wanted to know:

1. Does the Wi2021 work as intended by the Ministry?
2. Do people covered by the Wi2013 still receive enough help?

We also looked at various aspects of the integration process, such as:

- The speed with which people can start.

- How well local authorities offer tailor-made solutions.
- The quality of the lessons.
- How integration can be combined with work or other obligations.

What are the main results?

The results show that the experiences of integration programme participants vary greatly. Here we discuss the most important points.

1. The general objectives

The main objective of the Wi2021 is to enable integration participants to participate fully and quickly in Dutch society. This means that they not only learn the language, but also gain knowledge about society and find paid work. Many integration participants find that the lessons help them to learn Dutch and understand more about the Netherlands.

Approximately seven out of ten integration programme participants say that the programme has helped them to participate better in Dutch society, learn Dutch well and learn a lot about Dutch society. It is striking that family migrants are slightly less positive about the added value of integration than asylum migrants. Women are also slightly less positive than men. For some integration programme participants, “full participation” also means that they want to become Dutch citizens. This is only possible if they meet the language requirements, which is difficult for some groups.

2. Five key points of integration

The Wi2021 focuses on five key points. Below, we discuss how integration programme participants experience these.

Timely start

Many asylum seekers already start Dutch language lessons in the asylum seekers' centre. However, these lessons are often of varying quality and not structured. Integration participants want more support in the asylum seekers' centre, such as extra language lessons and information about work and Dutch society. They also want more contact with the local authority during this phase.

Speed

Some people can start their course quickly, but others have to wait a long time. For half of the asylum seekers, this is because they have not yet received an offer from the local authority. The people we spoke to wait between 6 and 9 months, with some waiting up to 18 months. This is from the moment they come to live in the local authority area until they start the course. Several people find the waiting time acceptable. People who find the waiting time too long sometimes feel that

they are wasting time or become demotivated. Family migrants do not always know that they are obliged to integrate. This can cause them stress or lead them to quit their jobs.

Customisation

Almost three-quarters of integration course participants feel that they are listened to carefully during the intake. They consider it important that their personal situation is taken into account. Interpreters are often needed to ensure that the conversations are properly understood. The learning ability test, which assesses what level is achievable, is also generally viewed positively. However, family migrants from the qualitative study experience more frustration with this test because they do not always understand its purpose.

Duality

Many integration programme participants combine work or voluntary work with integration. Almost half of the asylum seekers under the new integration programme have worked or done voluntary work since obtaining their residence permit. Among family migrants, this applies to two-thirds of the group. Approximately six in ten integration programme participants who work find this easy to combine with learning the language. For some integration programme participants, it is also difficult to work and integrate. Family migrants and people with care responsibilities, for example for young children, find this particularly difficult. Volunteering and internships are often seen as positive, because they help people to remain active. However, integration programme participants mainly want opportunities to find paid work.

Quality

Many integration programme participants are satisfied with the quality of the lessons, but there are also problems. The pace is sometimes too fast or too slow. A shortage of teachers means that lessons are sometimes cancelled, which does not benefit the quality. Integration programme participants also sometimes find it difficult that there are people of different ages and levels in the language class.

3. What makes integration difficult?

Integration programme participants mention various challenges:

- Learning the language can be difficult, especially for older people and those with low literacy skills.
- There may be little time to combine lessons with other commitments, such as work or care responsibilities.
- Some people lack opportunities to practise Dutch outside of class.

Personal circumstances also play a role. Older integration students, for example, may find the language requirements too demanding. Or parents with children may struggle to balance their care responsibilities with attending integration classes.

4. Support from the local authority

The role of local authorities has become more important under the Wi2021. More than six in ten asylum seekers who completed the questionnaire think that the local authority's explanation of what they need to do to integrate is good. There are also areas for improvement:

- People want clearer information, especially about finding work, studying, affordable language courses and finances.
- Experiences with contact persons vary greatly. Some people are very satisfied with the guidance they receive. Others are dissatisfied and see room for improvement. A contact person who offers good guidance and pays attention to the personal situation makes a big difference.

5. Financial relief and difficulty making ends meet

Many asylum seekers receive help from the municipality in paying their fixed expenses. This reduces their worries and helps them to focus on their integration. Approximately three out of four asylum seekers are satisfied with this support. However, some would prefer to manage their own finances in order to be independent. In addition, the local authority sometimes offers courses or consultations to help people with financial matters. Most people are also positive about this.

Nevertheless, many integration participants have difficulty making ends meet. They indicate that they often “just about” or “just don't” manage to cover their costs. Some have to make use of facilities such as the food bank. This causes stress and makes integration even more difficult.

6. Experiences with finding a language school

Family migrants under the Wi2021 must find and pay for a language school themselves. Approximately one in three family migrants who completed the questionnaire find it difficult to find an integration course themselves. Many of them mention the costs as a problem. They also want more information about cheaper options. Four in ten family migrants would like more information about finding an affordable language course.

What is going well in the eyes of integration participants?

Integration participants see several positive aspects in the new integration system:

- Customisation: Many integration participants appreciate that they are listened to carefully during the intake interviews. Personal attention and interpreters make the process clearer and more pleasant.

- Language support: When local authorities offer additional opportunities to practise Dutch, such as language cafés or language buddies, this is greatly appreciated.
- Financial assistance: Many asylum seekers appreciate the assistance with fixed expenses and money management.
- Planning for the future: The Personal Integration and Participation Plan (PIP) often ties in well with the ambitions of integration participants.
- Contact with the local authority: If there is a good relationship with the contact person, integration participants feel more supported and understood. If the asylum seekers' centre is located in the local authority where someone is going to live, people can also start integrating more quickly.

These points show that important steps are being taken to help integration participants. It is important to further expand these positive experiences and improve them where necessary.

What could be improved?

Newcomers indicate that improvements are possible:

- More information: People want better explanations about finding work, affordable language courses, studying and finances.
- Faster start: Less waiting time between different parts of the process and a need for more language teaching in the asylum seekers' centre.
- Duality: More opportunities to practise Dutch in real life and more opportunities to participate directly, for example through paid work. More opportunities to combine language and work.
- Less stress: Better alignment of language lessons with the personal situation of integration participants.
- **Municipal contact person: frequent changes, little contact and no interpreters are among the obstacles for integration participants in their relationship with the municipal contact person.**

Conclusion

The experiences of integration program participants are very diverse. Some are satisfied with the guidance and opportunities, while others mainly experience obstacles. Municipalities play a major role in the success of integration. It is important that they provide clear information and good support so that everyone has the opportunity to participate in Dutch society.