

Education policies for adolescent immigrants

This policy brief is an excerpt from the report
Integrating Immigrants into the Nordic Labour Markets



Summary

Adolescent immigrants in Nordic school systems face particular challenges that may negatively influence their labour-market prospects. There has been little research into the effectiveness of interventions targeting this group. Nonetheless, there is convincing evidence that certain educational practices benefit disadvantaged students, and it is likely that some of these findings are also applicable to immigrant students. Important measures in this area include study support and guidance. Alternative paths to employment are further suggested for individuals who have difficulties qualifying for and finishing regular high school study programmes.

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Background

As a consequence of historically high levels of immigration, which peaked in 2015, large numbers of non-Western immigrants are currently enrolled in education in the Nordic countries. During the period 2011–2016, almost 200,000 young asylum-seekers arrived in the Nordic Region. The following sections highlight both the specific problems that adolescent immigrants face in Nordic schools and the policies that could address them.

The problems of adolescent immigrants at school

Immigrants who arrive in the Nordic countries at middle- or high-school age are particularly disadvantaged at school for several reasons. First, language acquisition tends to be more difficult for ad-

olescents than for younger children. Second, many adolescent immigrants come from school systems that are far below the standard in the Nordic countries. As a result, they tend to lag behind their peers not only in languages, but also in universal subjects such as mathematics. Third, their parents often have a lower socioeconomic status (e.g. low levels of both education and income), which is well known to be negatively related to educational outcomes. In many cases, these factors are compounded by other problems. Young refugees, for instance, may be suffering from trauma, and may have experienced high levels of stress during the asylum process. Finally, migrants are also more likely to attend socially segregated schools, and may encounter difficulties studying at home due to overcrowding.



Policy conclusions

Overcoming the disadvantages of adolescent immigrants is a huge challenge for the Nordic school systems. Unfortunately, relatively few empirical studies, both in the Nordic Region and elsewhere, have sought to identify the most effective educational initiatives in this area. Nonetheless, more general high-quality research on the effectiveness of different school practices for disadvantaged students may offer some guidance. In addition, there are several examples of policy-oriented literature that put forward well-founded conclusions on the basis of theoretical arguments, qualitative studies and descriptive data. A review of this literature suggests that the following policy recommendations may offer the strongest support to young immigrants:

- Implement school practices that help disadvantaged students. Empirical studies with strong research designs have identified various practices as beneficial for disadvantaged students in general. Such practices include tutoring, small-group learning, cooperative learning, feedback and progress monitoring, and coaching and mentoring of teachers.
- Provide more study support in the immigrants' mother tongue. Although in most cases bilingual teaching in regular subjects is unrealistic – there are simply not enough bilingual teachers – help from teaching assistants may be an option.
- Give students more time to study. This can be achieved through summer schools and educational programmes during other breaks. It might also involve reducing the number of subjects and allowing young migrants to devote extra time to subjects that will help them to qualify for high school.
- Avoid discouraging students. Written appraisals, rather than simple grades, may be useful for newly arrived students who do not achieve a pass in a given subject. It might also be beneficial not to keep students in preparatory programmes for high school for too long that focus solely on language learning and exclude other subjects. This may reduce motivation.
- Avoid excessively stringent admission criteria to vocational high-school programmes. Previous studies have identified that Swedish admission criteria are too high.
- Implement measures to increase the participation of young migrants in vocational high-school programmes. Studies show that there is a high probability that students who complete a vocational programme will find a job shortly afterwards. At the same time, students born to parents from non-Western countries are underrepresented in vocational training (at least in Denmark, Norway and Sweden). It may therefore be helpful to offer more study guidance that involves parents and helps them to formulate educational objectives suited to each child's academic aptitudes.
- Offer individualised job training. The focus should be on practical skills for those who experience difficulties in qualifying for and finishing regular high school study programmes.

These recommendations combine general policies that benefit disadvantaged students with policies specifically targeted at adolescent immigrants. The focus is on helping students qualify for high school, increasing participation in vocational programmes, and offering individualised job training for those who have difficulty qualifying for regular programmes.

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