

Language training for asylum seekers and newcomers in Sweden

Key findings and recommendations

Executive Summary

Swedish language training and education for adult immigrants occurs under the intersecting policy areas of integration, labour market participation and education. Since the first initiatives in the 1960s, it has undergone numerous reforms. Today it is, for the large part, a highly formalised education while at the same time some certain aspects of language training are practically unregulated. Importantly, asylum seekers and refugees have significantly different access to language training and education. In the following we consider language training and education for asylum seekers and refugees aged 16–64 years.

Swedish for immigrants (Svenska för invandrare, sfi) is a formal municipal adult education with national school and course curricula accessible free of charge to all adult immigrants who do not have basic Swedish proficiency.

Refugees (with domicile registration) generally participate in the education as part of the Introduction Program coordinated by the Public Employment Service.

Asylum seekers do not have access to this education. Asylum seekers and refugees of school age can enter the education system and access language education as part of this. Adult asylum seekers can also access Swedish training through the third sector, including study associations, folk high schools and NGOs.

Swedish language training and education is contested and this Policy Brief by the GLIMER Swedish team highlights some conflicting tendencies and how these could be considered in relation to further development work.

Methods and empirical research

GLIMER is informed by a combination of rigorous policy analysis, qualitative research with multi-party stakeholders, and secondary analysis. This policy brief is reliant on policy documents, statistics and evaluations together with interviews with stakeholders from

national, regional and local authorities and the third sector. We worked across the region of Scania and the municipalities of Malmö and Eslöv.

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Bringing together researchers and practitioners from five lead institutions – the University of Edinburgh, the University of Glasgow, Università della Calabria, Malmö University and the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies – it researches how issues relating to governance impact displaced peoples' experiences of integration in contemporary Europe.

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This policy brief is supported by our full report about Swedish language training and education available at: glimer.eu/outputs

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Context

The Swedish government has supported Swedish language training of various forms since the mid-1960s. While it was first established with migrant workers in mind, over time it has become more oriented towards newly arrived refugees and their families.

Today the large part of it is organised as part of public adult education, and as such distinct from other forms of language training, for instance labour market training. Adult refugees typically access the education as part of the Introduction Program for refugees. Adult asylum seekers do not access the education system, but are reliant on the third sector for language training. Asylum seekers and refugees of school age access the school system, and language training through this, but access for asylum seekers is more limited.

Swedish for immigrants in municipal adult education

The education 'Swedish for immigrants' (Svenska för invandrare, sfi) is accessible free of charge for residents aged 16 years and who do not have basic Swedish language proficiency. It is regulated by national steering documents and organised and financed through municipal adult education.

Refugees commonly access the education as part of the Introduction Program. The municipalities receive economic compensation from the state for the refugee reception, including for language education.

Almost all refugees and their families participate in the Introduction Program, coordinated by the Public Employment Service. It lasts for 24 months and participants who follow their individual introduction plans are eligible for the Introduction Allowance. Participation is not mandatory, but a person who does not participate according to their individual plan has no right to other kinds of economic support. Swedish for immigrants is a prime component of these plans. Swedish for immigrants contains three study pathways and four courses that are the same independently of study pathway. Study pathway 1 is for persons with no or short educational background, and pathway 3 for persons with longer educational backgrounds.

It is the responsibility of the municipality that all residents eligible for the education can access it, but they do not need to organise it themselves. Since 2011 folk high schools (folkhögskolor)

accredited by the National Agency of Education (Skolverket) have the right to offer it if they wish. Municipalities can also subcontract the education to other providers, including third sector and private contractors.

Language Introduction in upper secondary school

Asylum seekers and refugees of school age can enter the education system and access language training through this (but asylum seeking children do not have compulsory school attendance). Persons with a residence permit have the right to enter the upper secondary education from the age of 16 and until the age of 20 years; asylum seekers only until the age of 18 years, but municipalities are free to offer it. Asylum seekers who entered the upper secondary school before the age of 18 years, have the right to complete the education. Under certain circumstances, this right persists after a negative decision on the asylum application.

'Language Introduction' (Språkintröduktion) is an upper secondary school program for students above 16 years who do not qualify for a national program and who do not speak Swedish. It involves, among other things complementary studies to reach qualification to a national program and Swedish language education.

Voluntary language training initiatives

Asylum seekers of 18 years and more (and refugees without domicile registration) have no right to enter formal language education. Instead, they can receive language training through voluntary initiatives from the third sector. This means that availability varies across different locations. Ability to participate can also depend on access to childcare and transportation.

In response to the comparatively high numbers of asylum seekers in 2015, the government now funds new forms of language training, including 'Swedish from day one' (Svenska från dag ett) and 'Everyday Swedish' (Vardagssvenska) organised by folk high schools and study associations. These courses can vary in content and length. In addition, the government also finances so-called 'Early Initiatives for Asylum Seekers' (Tidiga insatser för asylsökande, TIA), which may include language training. This funding is distributed to local initiatives after a decision of the County Administrative Board. In Scania, a large majority of the initiatives are organised in Malmö.



Findings

Formal education

State regulation of Swedish for immigrants has increased over time. This development has involved a shift away from varying forms of training and towards an educational setting. The ambition was to create one national good quality and standardised education. Requirements to have authorised teachers, national tests and standardised grades, as well as requirements to have a responsible principal, are some of the regulations that education providers need to comply with. At the same time, this development has also involved a strong demand for the individual adaptation of the education to the heterogeneous backgrounds of students. This has manifested itself through differentiated courses and study pathways, as well as flexible teaching hours. Moreover, the increased differentiation between groups of students, has also meant that asylum seekers as a group since 1991 are excluded from the education. Instead, asylum seekers are referred to more arbitrary forms of language training organised by the third sector and which varies geographically. The School Inspectorate conduct quality reviews on how municipalities live up to the ambitions decided by the state and state agencies. Our material confirms that this governance model is a top down model, with local level implementation. However, at the local level there is still variation.

Organisation

Initially a variety of organisations were responsible for the provision of Swedish for immigrants. Over time, as a way to enable regulation of a standardised education, but also, for instance, to even out geographical variation of access to Swedish for immigrants, today it is integrated as part of municipal adult education. This has indeed contributed to balancing out of geographical variations. However, municipalities can subcontract the education to third sector and private providers. This is, sometimes due to political ideologies, done differently across municipalities, ranging from having all education in-house to have all subcontracted.

Coordination of integration measures

Fast labour market integration for refugees and their families through parallel activities during the Introduction Program, mean that language education is combined with other education or labour market training. From 1 January 2018, new regulations of the Introduction Program strengthened this further. Such combinations demand well-developed horizontal coordination. In Malmö, for example, the agreement on the local level is that the participants study Swedish in the morning while the Public

Employment Service secure other activities for the participants in the afternoon. Another aspect of the horizontal coordination is the one between the municipalities, who are responsible for the language education, and eventual third sector or private education providers.

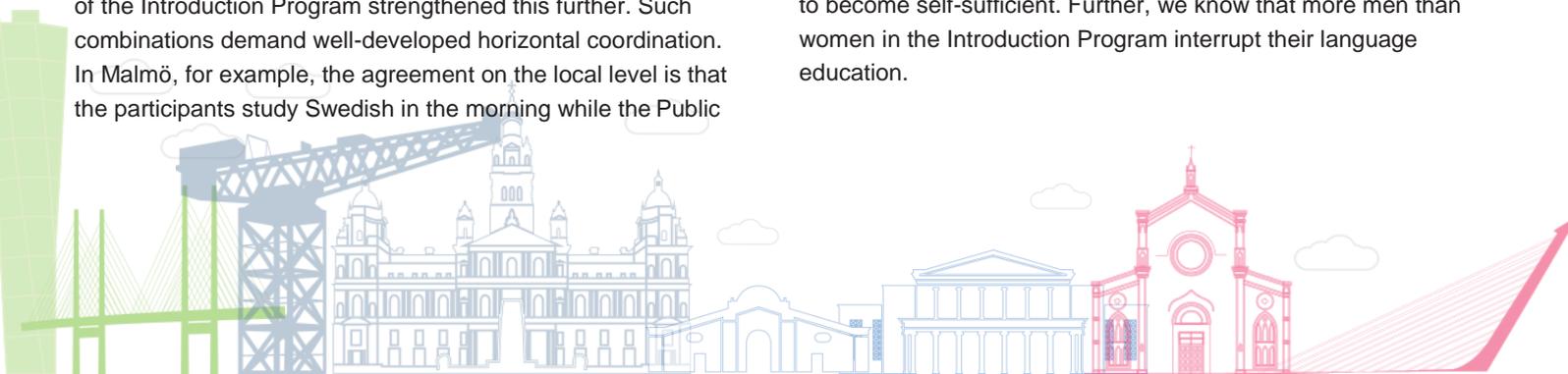
Moreover, our material indicates that many professionals responsible for language education are critical of the increased labour market focus, saying that it impacts negatively on the language education, especially for those with no or little formal educational background. Generally, language training professionals are not supportive of parallel activities and do not think it is an efficient method for achieving long term labour market integration. Here we have identified a tension between the state, local politicians and the Public Employment Service on the one side, and language education professionals on the other.

The role of third sector

Today Swedish for immigrants is regulated by national law and curriculum, and it is under municipal responsibility. However, this setting did not come through easily. In its early days, language training was to a large extent organised by study associations and folk high schools. As non-formal education institutions they were exempted from the curriculum; instead they could relate to these as 'recommendations'. Today the situation is reversed. As study associations and folk high schools are increasingly involved in language education again, they must be accredited by the National Agency for Education and they are obliged to hire teachers who have the right to examine and grade students.

Gender

The gender dimension is repeatedly problematised in labour market debates, in principal the slow labour market integration of women with short or no educational backgrounds. However, in education policy discourses regarding Swedish for immigrants, it is not raised. This is also mirrored in our interviews with professionals from language education: our interviewees had nothing or very little to say about gender in the education. At the same time, from statistics we know that a majority of women that arrived to Sweden as refugees after 2015 have a lower educational background than men, and may face more difficulties to become self-sufficient. Further, we know that more men than women in the Introduction Program interrupt their language education.



Findings continued

Unequal language education for residency

Language education for asylum seeking minors is not mandatory, but they have the right to access it through upper secondary school. In order to achieve qualifications to enter a national program, most will first enter the Language Introduction program. If they enter a program before the age of 18 years, they have the right to finish this, also after the age of 18 years. Under some circumstances, this right prevails in spite of a rejected asylum application. In addition a completed upper secondary degree might enable employment, which might lead to a work permit. This means that many asylum seeking students find themselves under extreme pressure to enter a national program before the age of 18 years. In the view of this, the varying quality of the education across municipalities is detrimental, along with the insecurity geographical relocation of a student implies. In addition,

many upper secondary schools find it challenging to cater for the individual needs that could bridge into national programs or the labour market.

Non-regulated voluntary initiatives

The development of language education for new arrivals have been strongly drawn towards increased formalisation and unity. This development has implied that asylum seekers cannot access it. In response to the growing numbers of asylum seekers in the aftermath of 2015, the government has encouraged third sector language training initiatives for asylum seekers. These are not regulated and there is no follow-up. This set-up creates a remarkable discrepancy between language training for asylum seekers and refugees.

Recommendations

Unitary and differentiated

It is significant that the Swedish for immigrant's education over time has become more unitary, both in its regulation and organisation. Simultaneously, in response to the varying backgrounds of the students, it has also become differentiated in courses and study pathways. Moreover, while the municipality is responsible to secure that eligible residents can access the education, they can also subcontract it to other providers. This development, which in part follows the general development of the education system, has also meant that language education has become increasingly disconnected from the rationalities of non-formal education of the third sector as well as labour market training. It is unclear to what extent this has served language proficiency acquisition and labour market integration of new arrivals.

Sequential vs. parallel modules

The question whether basic language education should be a prerequisite for entering other studies or labour market measures, or if it is best studied in parallel, has been a returning issue in the policy development. For a long time, it was a prerequisite to first study language before accessing labour market training, which meant that it also became an obstacle for some newcomers, especially persons with short or no previous educational background. Today it is typically a part-time activity of the Introduction Program, to be combined with other measures.

Local variation - Is it all about steering?

In spite of all regulation and unitary organisation, there is variation of the performance of Swedish for immigrants across municipalities, this is also visible in our study. Interestingly, this variation cannot be explained by regulations, finances, or the educational background of students. While the development of Swedish for immigrants is focused on steering, this raises questions about how far steering reaches, and what other factors might impact on language acquisition. Relevant aspects might involve the didactics in the classroom, including the relation between the students and teachers, and housing, both housing conditions and locations.

Humanitarian costs of municipal discretion

The situation for asylum seekers aged 16–18 years, in many cases unaccompanied minors, is far from ideal. While this is a vulnerable group itself, their vulnerability is increased by the varying access to, and quality of education across municipalities. This might have far reaching implications, including on residence permit, and is urgent to oversee.

Language training for asylum seekers

After many years in absence, in 2016 Swedish language training for asylum seekers was re-introduced. Instead of opening up the existing education for asylum seekers, the government introduced new measures through the third sector. It is unclear to what extent these are temporary or here to stay, and if they are here to stay why access to education is not preferred.

