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Language and Integration Courses for Migrants  
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## **Language and Integration Courses for Migrants: the AKI Research Review in brief**

### *Linguistic competence – the focus of current integration policy*

Integration courses for newly-arrived migrants currently constitute a central element of state integration policy, and the focus of these courses is the teaching of the national language. The courses also aim to impart basic knowledge about the host society and provide initial access to the labour market. Knowledge of the national language is increasingly viewed as the key to accessing further opportunities for participation in the host society, in particular the labour market. Moreover, a common language is viewed as a condition for societal cohesion. Based on this, in Germany and many other countries today, considerable financial and administrative resources are invested in providing a wide variety of language and integration courses for migrants. At the same time, however, little is known about the results that can be expected from such measures.

### *Objective: to provide reliable information about the effects of integration courses*

The main objective of this AKI research report is to evaluate the results achieved by integration and language courses. Among the various conceivable effects of such courses, of particular interest here is the question as to how effective existing integration programmes are at imparting language skills and to what extent they facilitate labour market integration.

### *Examples from Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden*

The integration programmes staged in the Netherlands and Sweden provided important points of reference for the development of the integration courses that were launched in Germany in early 2005. Thus, data concerning these two countries were included in the research report. With regard to Germany, which has a long tradition in providing different types of language-promotion services, the analysis focuses on insights concerning the precursors of the new courses.

*Limited data basis: little scientific research has been carried out on the results of integration courses*

The systematic and comprehensive evaluation of political intervention measures is by no means automatic, and the information available is often sketchy. The studies that exist were mainly commissioned by state authorities and explore their specific concerns. Thus, these studies tend to focus more on organizational processes and the use of financial resources than on the conditions and process of language learning. Therefore, the information analyzed for the research report mainly concerned the scope of the integration programmes, drop-out rates and the language skills of the course graduates.

*The reach and completion of courses*

Courses generally only target a proportion of newly arrived migrants. The Netherlands has had considerable success in identifying the relevant target group in the context of the initial stages of the integration programme. However, only around half of those for whom participation in the course programme was agreed actually completed the entire course, including the final examination. Based on a somewhat different participant composition, around 40 percent of those who started courses in Sweden had, after around two and a half years, completed them (in general successfully). Up to now, it has not been possible to clearly identify what participation and completion rates can in principle be achieved and thus adopted as a success criterion. The reasons why migrants fail to participate or drop out of courses are numerous, the most common being employment, health problems (e.g. in the case of traumatized refugees) and childcare issues. Contrary to the public perception of women as a problem group, men tend to be under-represented among course participants and tend to refer to work commitments as a reason for staying away from courses.

*Courses generally, but not always, prompt an improvement in language skills*

Overall, it may be assumed that a majority of course participants improve their knowledge of the national language in the course of the programmes. This applies to around two thirds of participants who completed a final test in the Netherlands. According to a German study, progress can be expected among migrants who have been resident in the country for longer periods and whose knowledge of German had often previously stagnated. However, a considerable number of migrants – around one third in the Netherlands – do not benefit from course attendance in terms of the improvement of their language skills. Such discrepancies with respect to competence growth can mainly be explained by the different educational backgrounds of the participating migrants, a factor that clearly cannot be overcome by the courses. The correlation between specific languages of origin and the learning of Dutch, Swedish or German is less clear. Furthermore, there do not appear to be any significant differences in terms of the performances of the sexes in this regard.

### *Political targets for language competence are often unachievable*

Based on their individual comments, a clear majority of course participants appear to perceive the provision of courses as helpful to their integration. However, the available experience and evidence would indicate that, even among participants who made progress, the level of language competence achieved is generally lower than that defined as desirable by governments. The aim of courses is to impart language skills that will enable migrants to earn their living. Thirteen percent of course graduates in the Netherlands achieved the level deemed necessary for gainful employment and almost another third achieved the level immediately below this, which is viewed as necessary for participation in everyday societal life. The results of the course models that preceded the current integration courses in Germany indicate that the level of competency (B1) targeted by the new integration courses, which generally corresponds to the second more modest target in the Dutch programme, can only rarely be achieved by average beginners in the context of the proposed course duration. In Sweden, 35 percent of beginners achieved the final certificate which confirmed that they had reached the relatively high level of language proficiency that would enable them to participate in working life.

Whereas drop-out rates in Sweden are somewhat higher than in the Netherlands, those who stick with the courses clearly achieve better results. It should, however, be taken into account here that the participant groups in the two countries differ in their composition and that the linguistic levels tested on completion of the courses are not directly comparable. A comparison of the mandatory programme in the Netherlands and Sweden's voluntary system does not provide any clear evidence of an increase in success rates based on the imposition of sanctions.

It is conceivable that participation and success rates could be improved through the provision of courses that would enable the more flexible combination of language learning and gainful employment and qualification options, the provision of more differentiated and better quality courses and the provision of more effective support to migrants who participate in such courses. At the same time, non-participation and dropping out should not automatically be equated with a failure to learn the language as little is known about the language skills of those who did not attend courses or failed to complete them.

### *Effects of integration programmes on opportunities in host societies unknown*

It is very difficult to comment on the results of the integration programmes with respect to additional aims such as better integration into the labour market, knowledge of the host society and identification with this new environment. Systematic studies that could clarify whether the graduates of integration programmes enjoy better opportunities for participation in societal, economic and political life than other migrants have not yet been carried out in any of the three countries studied.

*Comprehensive, transparent reporting and detailed evaluations required*

Almost all statements regarding the possibilities, effects and problems associated with current language and integration courses must be expressed with reservations. In the absence of a solid empirical basis, it is not possible to draw any clear conclusions with respect to the effectiveness of such programmes and the general form they take.

Thus, in Germany regular reporting needs to be introduced which should include core information on the courses and the participants. Secondly, the relative contribution of integration courses to the process of the integration of migrants should be explored in the context of a detailed causal evaluation. The central feature of this kind of effect analysis is a “before” and “after” assessment (in this case relating to language skills) involving comparative groups of participants and non-participants. A number of important factors (e.g. education and age of migrants) which can influence the acquisition of skills in the course context should also be recorded. It will not be possible to make well-founded decisions on effective measures for the promotion of language acquisition and other integration processes in the absence of this knowledge base.

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The full (German-language) report can be downloaded in PDF format from:  
[www.aki.wz-berlin.de](http://www.aki.wz-berlin.de).

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