

Refugees and education. Moving towards more efficient organisation, better access and higher quality.

23 February 2017

Wars in various parts of the world have led to an increase in the number of refugees coming to the Netherlands in recent years. Their prospects of finding paid work and participating fully in Dutch society are poor. In this report, the Education Council of the Netherlands considers how education could provide more of a helping hand for refugees, with the primary focus on children and adults without a basic qualification.

The Council argues in the report that the asylum policy should give greater priority to education, and that refugees should be offered a good level of basic services. Refugees will continue to come to the Netherlands, sometimes in unexpectedly large numbers; the education system is currently inadequately prepared for this, leading to unacceptable delays in organising educational provision when refugees arrive in large numbers. Although some of the issues appear to have been resolved, refugees still have insufficient access to schools, training and courses. The quality of education offered also leaves something to be desired, and it could be organised more efficiently.

The limited access occurs in all parts of the education system. Preschool facilities are not available for toddlers in every municipality, and there are delays in placing school-age children in suitable schools. Inhibiting factors include a shortage of places, lack of parental support, insufficient experience with and knowledge of the target group, uncertainty about funding and frustration about the frequency with which children (are forced to) move house. After spending some time in an international transitional class, refugees of secondary school age are often transferred to a school level that is below their potential ability, with their command of the Dutch language being the decisive factor. The same applies to those in senior secondary vocational education. Finally, there are accessibility problems in the civic integration process, as a result of which those holding residence permits often begin their civic integration process late, and sometimes not at all.

The quality of education provided to refugees falls short due to a lack of expertise and good teaching materials. Schools lack expertise in teaching Dutch as a second language (NT2), as well as knowledge of international competences and (the ability to identify) traumas. The teaching materials used (intake instruments, methods and tests) are often outdated.

There are three areas of inefficiency in the teaching of refugees. First, their school careers are repeatedly interrupted or even halted due to the many times they have to move home during the asylum procedure. As a result, children constantly have to start over again, which is frustrating both for themselves and for schools. Second, there is too little sharing of knowledge in schools where refugees are first enrolled. Third, ad hoc policy creates all kinds of costs, with each region devising their own solutions when educational provision has to be organised quickly for large groups of refugees. Although there are agencies and mechanisms designed to encourage schools and local authorities in different regions to learn from each other, the frameworks within which they have to work are unclear. In short, there is too much improvisation, raising the risk that problems will be repeated the next time there is a peak in refugee numbers.

The Council makes three recommendations for resolving these problems.

Recommendation 1: Make education more accessible in all phases of the school trajectory

Education must be made more accessible to refugees, even when the numbers entering the country increase rapidly. The Council recommends giving all young refugee children access to high-quality preschool provision,

regardless of the education level of their parents. The Council also calls on schools, local authorities and the Dutch Inspectorate of Education to work together to ensure that primary and secondary schools accept refugee pupils more readily. Progression to higher school tracks can be encouraged by evaluating international transitional classes and the language competencies acquired in them, and by placing them within broad school communities offering different educational levels (not just in schools for preparatory secondary vocational education (VMBO)). Senior secondary vocational schools (MBO) could make better use of the existing policy scope to offer opportunities to young refugees, for example by validating qualifications obtained elsewhere, something that happens rarely at present. They could also offer language bridging programmes to students who intend going on to higher MBO tracks. Finally, the Council believes that local authorities could take more control over the civic integration process. They could also offer advice to refugees on local educational and job opportunities.

Recommendation 2: Invest in expertise and teaching materials

Raising the quality of education for refugees requires investments in the expertise of teachers and school teams, as well as in better teaching materials. Expertise in second language acquisition and teaching is indispensable. Not every teacher or team member needs to possess this knowledge to the same degree, but every team needs access to it. It is also important that teachers have an awareness of trauma and how to recognise the signs of it, and that they are competent in an international context. The government could play a more prominent role in establishing teaching and testing methods if – as seems to be the case – the market is too small for commercial publishers. The Council reiterates that good teaching must be based on scientific insights, and therefore calls for thorough research into the effects of the different types of education offered to new refugees.

Recommendation 3: Give higher priority to education in asylum policy and encourage collaboration

One potential effect of giving higher priority to education in asylum policy would be to minimise the number of times that refugees (both minors and adults) have to move house, thus enabling them to begin a school career or adult education course quickly. That would be highly motivating. The Council also advocates network-building and knowledge-sharing. It recommends creating flexible regional networks consisting of local authorities, education establishments and other stakeholders, with local authorities having overall guidance. A well-informed network can be scaled up quickly and efficiently. When in 'idling' mode, each member performs their regular activities, but as soon as it is needed, a joint plan is implemented to activate the network. Agile regional networks such as these would increase both the reactive ability and the learning capacity of the education system. The Council believes it is the task of central government to formulate a coherent national vision of education for refugees, based among other things on scientific evidence and best practices. National frameworks would also avoid tensions between the central and local level, or between public authorities and, for example, school boards and educational alliances. Central government would also provide adequate and predictable funding, ensure the presence of training opportunities and the involvement of national partners such as the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) and the National Working Group on Education for Asylum-seekers and Newcomers (LOWAN), as well as the Dutch Inspectorate of Education.