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Introduction Program for Refugees**





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At the request of the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills (HK-dir) and the Directorate of Integration and Diversity (IMDi), Fafo has examined how courses in Life Skills in a New Country are implemented as part of the Introduction Programme for newly arrived refugees in Norwegian municipalities.

Methodologically, the study is based on: (1) a document analysis reviewing curricula and professional guidelines for several components of the Introduction Programme, with particular attention to how life skills are integrated into a coherent program; (2) a survey distributed to those responsible for life skills courses in the municipalities; (3) site visits and qualitative interviews with those responsible for and those delivering life skills courses in five case municipalities; and (4) interviews with private providers.

Framework and ambitions for Life Skills in a New Country

When the Integration Act was implemented in 2021, Life Skills in a New Country became a standardized element and a mandatory component of the Introduction Programme. Standardization implies that national authorities (HK-dir and IMDi) provide recommendations, while municipalities, in collaboration with local actors, develop and deliver the course. The course consists of two parts: Career Competence and Migration, Health and Diversity. The recommended minimum requirement has been 15 hours for Career Competence and ten hours for Migration, Health and Diversity – 25 hours in total.

Refugees granted temporary collective protection, those with a background from Ukraine, were, until January 1st, 2026, not required to participate in Life Skills in a New Country as part of their Introduction Programme. From January 1st 2026, however, participation is mandatory for this group. At the same time, the scope of the course has been differentiated based on educational background. Participants with upper secondary education or higher are now required to complete a minimum of 15 hours, while other participants are still required to complete a minimum of 25 hours. Thus, participants with prior education may receive a less comprehensive life skills course.

The ambition of the course is to strengthen participants' motivation and sense of competence within the Introduction Programme. This is to be achieved by providing knowledge and confidence in navigating a new society, and by enabling participants to identify their own resources and make informed choices. National authorities recommend a dialogue-based approach implemented over time, aiming to promote reflection, a sense of safety, and trust among participants.

Findings

We find that life skills courses are implemented in most municipalities that resettle refugees and offer an Introduction Programme. Our analysis primarily examines municipal practice prior to the course becoming mandatory for participants with temporary collective protection. The majority of municipalities provide life skills courses to participants who are entitled to it, as well as to Ukrainian participants who, until January 1st, did not formally have the right to such training as part of their program. At the same time, we find substantial variation in organization, content, and implementation. Life Skills is a standardized course, but it is implemented in different ways at the local level.

This variation includes organization, such as scope (number of hours), when the course is offered, and by whom. Most participants receive either the minimum required number of hours or more, particularly for Migration, Health and Diversity. A larger proportion of participants do not receive the minimum requirement of 15 hours for Career Competence. While Migration, Health and Diversity is often offered early in the Introduction Programme, in line with national recommendations, Career Competence is often offered earlier in the program than recommended. Many municipalities also report offering the courses during periods when adult education services are on vacation, in order to ensure a full program when participants do not have regular instruction. Delivering life skills training during vacation periods results in a more compressed format, and several interviewees reflect that such compression is poorly suited for dialogue and reflection.

Responsibility for life skills courses varies across municipalities. Refugee services often have the main responsibility, particularly for the Career Competence component, while Migration, Health and Diversity is more frequently delivered in collaboration with adult education and health services. The use of external contributors from other local welfare services or from civil society is common, especially within Migration, Health and Diversity. The degree to which different components of the course are coordinated as part of a coherent overall approach varies. In some municipalities, a holistic ambition is evident, with close and systematic collaboration and coordination. In others, there is limited overview and restricted information flow, both between those delivering the course and between services responsible for different components of the Introduction Programme.

Some local course coordinators share ambitions aligned with the overarching goals of the course: strengthening participants' motivation and sense of competence when facing new expectations in a new society, including identifying and making use of their own skills and resources. In addition, they seek to provide insight into how individuals and their family members may respond to the migration process, including issues related to roles, trust, and dignity. We describe this as an existential, "living life"-oriented approach to the life skills course. An alternative approach, which we refer to as a fact-oriented approach, resembles a thematic syllabus and may include topics ranging from indoor climate and waste sorting to healthy diets and practical use of various apps for health services, public transportation, and banking. It is important to note that both approaches often coexist within municipalities, although the emphasis placed on each may vary. This variation is linked to how the life skills course is understood, as well as to the expertise available among those responsible for and delivering the course.

There is also variation in the type of competence among those teaching the course. Most instructors have either teaching or guidance qualifications, and many have experience in multicultural work. However, a relatively large proportion have limited formal expertise directly related to the two components, particularly Career Competence. While the University of South-Eastern Norway offers a course in Career Competence for employees in the Introduction Programme, there is no equivalent systematic professional development course in Migration, Health and Diversity. Many describe this component as particularly challenging to teach, partly because it addresses sensitive issues that require both subject-specific insight and appropriate pedagogical approaches.

Variation is also evident in course content. We find that parts of the course in life skills overlap with other components of the Introduction Programme, such as Norwegian language and social studies education, parental- and career guidance. Locally, those responsible address this overlap in different ways. Some emphasize that repetition and overlap are beneficial and create opportunities for deeper learning and reflection. Others experience a lack of coordination as challenging and inefficient. Nevertheless, Life Skills in a New Country emerges as a distinct component of the program through its explicit ambition to provide dialogue-based, reflection-oriented group instruction. In practice, however, this ambition is often difficult to fully realize due to factors such as language barriers, use of interpreters, heterogeneous participant groups, and limited time.

Recommendations

We find that *Life Skills in a New Country* is offered in most municipalities, including participants who so far have not had a right and obligation to the course. At the same time, we find considerable variation in how the course is offered. Such variation is likely unavoidable due to differing local conditions. However, we identify a lack of cohesive teaching materials and methods for the course, as well as lack of training of those responsible at the local level. National authorities present a broad range of topics to be addressed, alongside an ambition to stimulate reflection at a stage when participants have not yet developed a shared language for reflection. There is limited guidance on how to communicate potentially sensitive topics and how to facilitate reflection, which we interpret as a failure of governance: national authorities have not sufficiently equipped local actors to organize and implement the course in accordance with its stated ambitions. At the same time, we identify indications of coordination failures at the local level, both among the local actors involved and across different components of the Introduction Programme. In cases where interpreting services are not prioritized locally, this is primarily understood as an expression of limited resources.

We identify several challenges that must be addressed if the overarching ambitions of the life skills course are to be achieved. We conclude with four recommendations:

1. National authorities should develop a recommended teaching methodology for both components of Life Skills in a New Country, and those responsible for organization and implementation at the local level should receive training in this methodology.
2. Recommendations and guidance should be developed on the use of interpreters, particularly when the course is provided early in the Introduction Programme, involve linguistically diverse groups, and aim to promote reflection and dialogue.
3. Clarification is needed regarding which topics of the course should be addressed at an early stage of the Introduction Programme, and which should be deferred until participants have attained a higher level of Norwegian language skills.

A research project should be initiated to gather data on participants' experiences *with Life Skills in a New Country* courses, and to analyze these experiences in light of the program's stated ambitions and existing findings on local implementation.

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