

“Not just a refugee anymore”: The impact of Inclusion of the social integration of its students

Introduction

The most recently elected Dutch government has proposed alterations to the Immigratie en Naturalisatiedienst (IND) procedures, which will structurally affect the asylum process and reception of refugees in the Netherlands. Examples include the coalition’s proposal of the “strictest asylum procedure in Europe”, coupled with previous updates to the Dutch Civic Integration Act (Wet Inburgering) to include higher language level pathways, an increased focus on educational routes for young migrants, and more stringent focus on labour participation pathways. These looming procedural changes to the asylum and integration procedures in the Netherlands are set to have a direct impact on refugee and asylum seeker students. The refugee experience in the Netherlands is shrouded with uncertainty, wherein individuals face significant challenges in achieving social integration, as evidenced by reports highlighting their struggles with language barriers, limited access to employment, and challenges connecting with local communities.

Amidst these challenges, Inclusion continues to offer educational and social opportunities to support refugee students' integration into Dutch society and in an effort to combat the procedure uncertainty experienced refugees experience through their IND procedure. It is more important than ever to understand both the impact of the programme on its students, and the role it plays in their social integration.

Study Overview

Through a mixed methodological case study, new research from Inclusion investigates the impact of the Inclusion programme on the social integration of its students. A survey (n=64) was conducted via Qualtrics to assess the perceived social integration of Inclusion students and to provide a springboard for further focus group (n=5) data collection. The findings provide intersectional insights into the programme’s impact, the unique role of the programme in its students’ social integration and a foundation for improving integrative programs for refugees in the Netherlands.

The study answers three subsidiary questions:

- 1) Does Inclusion impact the social integration of refugee students?;
- 2) (ii) Are there demographic factors that influence the impact of the Inclusion programme on social integration?;
- 3) (iii) What is the role of the Inclusion programme in the social integration of refugee students?

Key Findings

- 1) The data from the Qualtrics survey was transformed to create comparable impact scores of perceived social integration before and after joining the Inclusion programme. Results show that Inclusion enhanced students' social integration scores substantially: before participating in Inclusion, students reported an average social integration score of (M=6.03 SD=2.52). After completing the programme, this score increased to (M=7.82 SD=1.91). A dependent t-test confirmed that this difference in means is statistically significant ($t(60) = -6.367$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that participants felt more socially integrated post-programme.
- 2) Interestingly, the study found that demographic factors such as gender, age, and residency status did not significantly influence the impact of Inclusion on social integration. Independent t-tests and ANOVA analyses revealed no significant differences in impact scores based on these factors, suggesting that the programme's benefits are broadly applicable across diverse demographic groups.
- 3) Inclusion emerged as a catalyst in the social integration of its students. As a catalyst, the opportunities, support, and guidance offered by the Inclusion programme facilitate a distinct three-step social integration process for its students.

Step 1: Participants reported that the programme helped them reconnect with their individuality, which had often been suppressed during the asylum process. By providing opportunities to revisit their educational and professional backgrounds and interact with peers in a supportive environment, Inclusion enabled students to regain their sense of identity.

Step 2: This renewed sense of self was crucial for the next step: creating social capital. Through buddy support, community events, and classroom interactions, students formed meaningful social connections and networks. These relationships extended beyond the university, blending academic and personal spheres, and fostering a sense of belonging within the larger community.

Step 3: The final step, long-term sustainable integration, was achieved as students reported feeling more connected to Dutch society. Participants expressed that Inclusion provided them with a sense of purpose and direction, helping them envision a future in the Netherlands. The social networks and support systems established through the programme were instrumental in this process, offering the confidence and motivation needed to pursue further education and integrate fully into society.

Quotes

“If it wasn't for the social aspect of Inclusion, I don't think I would have been able to apply [to a Masters course] because I got a lot of help from the friends, I made with the Inclusion program”

“but once you come to Inclusion and reconnect with people like you, you see your future”

“[In the AZC] most people used to still speak Arabic. I don't speak Arabic... I am like a really social person I really like to talk to people so you feel isolated... We were all like going back from an Inclusion event. And we were at the train station. And it was me [and other Inclusion students] who all speak Arabic, you know, all five of them. But none of them spoke in Arabic, just because I was there. It changed overnight. Like literally, I was crying because it was such a huge difference...my heart was broken. Just because of happiness”

A 23-year-old Inclusion student from Turkey alludes to COA's restriction of identity by saying: “It was just another camp. [The COA employee] told me you're not here to achieve your dreams”.

“Because one thing about me is that I'm queer...then suddenly, to have that all like, kind of, like, stripped away from me [in the AZC]...I'm closeted to my mom..[but with Inclusion you can] meet other queer Inclusion students”

“I am not just a refugee anymore”

“after a long time of like being isolated to finally like having like seeing people who are there who are more like you who are more similar to you and yeah, there's that sense of hope... sense of making connections”

“then I give the idea. Let's work on how to make the AZC more sustainable. And all the group mates like it. And then okay, let's do it. And then they were also really excited because they never been inside [an AZC]. And as I said, they never met a person who lives at an AZC”.

Discussion

Inclusion acts as a catalyst for the social integration of refugee students in the Netherlands by providing a flexible and supportive pathway tailored to their diverse needs. The programme's emphasis on informal learning and social capital formation allows participants to navigate their integration at their own pace. Students regain a sense of self and individuality through reconnecting with their past education and professional experiences, which is crucial for their self-perception and active creation

of social capital. Through various elements of the programme, such as Buddy Support and access to the wider university community, students build meaningful friendships and social ties, leading to long-term social integration. Testimonials highlight the transformative impact of Inclusion, with participants expressing newfound confidence, purpose, and social networks that extend beyond the confines of the asylum process. The programme's effectiveness across multiple demographic factors underscores its role in empowering refugee students to transition from being seen as "refugees" to fully integrated members of Dutch society. By empowering students to regain confidence and self-efficacy, Inclusion facilitates their active role in social capital creation, thereby enhancing their integration and participation in Dutch society. The programme ultimately equips refugee students with the social capital and empowerment necessary for a self-directed life.

Contact Information

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