

Policy Brief

A question of implementation

Analysis of the policy on permit holders and what is needed to improve it

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Policy Brief

1 Introduction

In 2015, a group of researchers from the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR), the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP), the Research and Documentation Centre (WODC), Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR) and Regioplan Policy Research drafted a policy brief entitled 'No time to lose' (*Geen tijd verliezen*) (Engbersen et al. 2015). It was published at a time when the Netherlands was receiving large numbers of asylum seekers from countries including Syria and Eritrea, and faced considerable problems in providing them with temporary shelter and, following the completion of the asylum procedure, housing them and helping them integrate into Dutch society. Based on an analysis of the integration of earlier refugee groups and the policy pursued at the time, the 2015 policy brief advocated early investment to help refugees learn Dutch and participate in Dutch society, preferably whilst they were still in reception centres. The policy brief also argued that shortening the period spent in reception and speeding up the housing process should be part of the policy. It also proposed giving back control of civic integration policy to local authorities and making more frequent use of a parallel approach combining learning (language and/or education) and working. 'No time to lose' was the motto. The integration process for refugees who had come to the Netherlands in the 1990s was not without its problems, which manifested themselves particularly in the sluggish start to their participation in the labour market. A more intensive policy and an earlier start focusing on participation should, it was argued, promote the integration of the new group of permit holders who settled in the Netherlands in around 2015 and thereafter.

In this policy brief we look back at the policy developments that have occurred since then, with the main purpose being to make recommendations for the policy in the coming years. To this end, we analyse the policy pursued in recent years. We relate this to empirical research on developments in the position and life situation of permit holders. This enables us to answer the question of whether the policy is addressing key problem areas on these fronts. Empirical research also provides an insight into the mechanisms which influence the position and life situation of permit holders. We investigate to what extent these play a role in the design of policy. In compiling this policy brief, we also analysed policy documents and consulted studies on policy implementation and effectiveness. We also drew on reports we commissioned from Significant Public and the Verwey-Jonker Institute on policy developments in the Netherlands and the position of permit holders and policy developments in Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Austria.

In this policy brief we focus particularly on the reception and housing policy and the civic integration policy, the two most important policies specifically aimed at permit holders. We also devote attention to policy aimed at improving the health, labour market position and educational position of permit holders.

2 Reception and housing policy

The reception policy is concerned with the period that asylum seekers spend in reception facilities whilst awaiting a decision on their asylum application. Once they have been granted a permit, they often still spend a considerable time living in an asylum seekers reception centre until they can move to a home in a Dutch municipality. Local authorities have a responsibility to house permit holders in proportion to the number of residents; in practice this means they are spread across the country.

Short and active reception period promotes the integration process

There is an extensive body of research literature on the relationship between the time spent in reception and the subsequent integration process. The picture that emerges from that literature is unequivocal: the longer a permit holder spends in the reception system, the more negative an impact it has on aspects such as their mental health, command of Dutch and labour market position. Frequent moves between reception centres are also found to have an adverse impact on mental health.

Research also suggests a positive correlation between undertaking activities whilst in reception (volunteering, following language lessons) and improved command of Dutch and a better labour market participation. In other words, the integration process of permit holders benefits from a short, active reception period. This implies that reception policy is a first step in integration policy.

Reception policy is integration policy: more attention for an active reception period

Several initiatives have been taken in recent years to enable asylum seekers and permit holders to fill their time usefully whilst in the reception system. They include the 'Preparing for civic integration' programme (*Voorinburgering*) and the 'Getting Started' activation project (*Aan de slag*), both of which aim among other things to increase the opportunities to learn Dutch and volunteer whilst in reception. In addition, many reception centres have a dedicated desk where staff from the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) and local volunteer agencies offer volunteering and other activities. These policy developments are thus in line with research findings which point to the importance of undertaking activities whilst in reception for the later integration of permit holders in Dutch society. Evaluation research on the above projects has however also shown that the opportunities to follow language lessons and volunteer vary between reception centres, that not everyone is reached by these projects and that there is room for improvement in the language level of participants. By their nature, projects are also temporary. Given the importance of a good start for permit holders, it is key to continue focusing systematically in the coming years on promoting an active reception period.

Create a wider range of activities in reception for permit holders and asylum seekers with a high chance of success

The opportunities to learn the language whilst in reception are not the same for everyone. For example, the 'Preparing for civic integration' programme is only open to permit holders who are still living in a reception centre. Asylum seekers with a high chance of having their asylum request granted are eligible for 24 hours of language lessons in Dutch as a second language (NT2), delivered by an accredited teacher. Other asylum seekers can receive language lessons from a volunteer. It is arguable that these demarcations adopt too narrow a definition, leading to missed opportunities in preparing people in reception centres better for their new lives in the Netherlands. Asylum seekers with a good chance of a successful application, in particular, could follow language courses earlier and more intensively, for example by allowing them to enter the preparatory civic integration programme, which is currently reserved for processed permit holders living in reception centres. The importance of having a broad group who are eligible for language courses and other participation activities is becoming ever more pressing as the waiting times in the centres have risen sharply in recent years (see below). The idea of treating reception policy as a first step in the integration policy is in keeping with having a broad target group who are eligible for language lessons and participation activities during their period in reception.

Paid work during the reception period uncommon

Performing paid work is another way of facilitating an active reception period. Currently, however, it is not easy for people to perform paid work whilst living in a reception centre, partly because of the requirement for a work permit. Moreover, asylum seekers are only permitted to work after their application has been in the processing system for six months. They are allowed to do paid work for a maximum of 24 weeks per year. Research among Syrian permit holders shows that only 5% of them performed paid work during their period in reception. With a view to facilitating an active reception period and also maintaining occupational skills, it would be sensible to remove obstacles to performing paid work during the reception period. Those obstacles consist mainly in the administrative procedures mentioned above (work permit) and the way the group who are permitted to work is defined (only after six months, limited period within a year). To increase the labour participation rate during the reception period, it is important that asylum seekers and permit holders in reception centres are actively brought into contact with potential employers. Agreements could be made with employers on making jobs and work experience placements available, for example in sectors and occupations where there are staff shortages.

Short reception period? Length of time spent in reception has only increased in recent years

A number of (tentative) steps have thus been made in the policy aimed at increasing the opportunities for participation during the reception period. On the other hand, there has as yet been no shortening of the period spent in reception; in fact, the reverse has tended to

be the case in recent years. Strikingly enough, the length of time spent in reception during the peak in asylum requests around 2015 was relatively short, but increased substantially in the years thereafter. Those who obtained a permit in 2014 waited an average of 110 days; permit holders who received their permit in 2019 had to wait an average of 208 days (between first entering a reception centre and receiving a permit). Staff cuts at the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) are one of the reasons that an increasing number of asylum requests in recent years have not been processed within the statutory period of six months. This is driving up the waiting times for receiving a permit. Even after a permit is granted, permit holders often spend a considerable time in reception centres until they are actually able to move to a home in a municipality. The squeeze on the housing market in many municipalities plays a role here.

Shortening the period spent in reception is a major policy challenge. A first step towards achieving this would be to resolve the problems at the IND. The squeeze on municipal housing markets also means there are no simple solutions to speeding up the process of finding accommodation for permit holders. In the period 2015/2016, several temporary measures were taken to allow local authorities to be creative in housing permit holders (e.g. in schools or office buildings). It seems almost inevitable that such fairly unorthodox approaches will be needed once again to enable more permit holders to be moved out of reception and ease the pressure on local housing markets as far as possible. Recently several government ministries, the COA and the local and provincial authorities proposed invoking 'interim measures', with the aim of housing several permit holders in a single dwelling whilst they are waiting for a regular home. This means they would then no longer be in asylum seekers reception centres, but would also not be making use of the regular municipal housing stock. In addition to these interim measures, the same parties point out the importance of performance agreements with housing associations, intensifying the housing policy for groups requiring extra help and increasing the financial resources to speed up the housing of permit holders and opening the way for flexible housing. To what extent these measures will bear fruit remains to be seen, but all in all the prospects of a shorter period spent in reception are not good. That is a worrying situation, because a long – and getting longer – period spent in reception means that permit holders get off to a bad start.

[More clarity needed about the scope for and results of targeted placement policy](#)

Due to the remit of local authorities, permit holders end up spread across the country. Research in several European countries suggests that a more targeted placement policy can help improve the labour market chances of permit holders; partly in the light of this, the Netherlands is using a 'Screening and matching' programme in an attempt to achieve a better match between the background, training and interests of permit holders and the labour market region where they are housed. The underlying idea is that this will make it easier for them to find work than if they are spread arbitrarily across the country.

In practice, however, implementing this ‘better match’ approach proves to be fairly complex. It is for example not always straightforward to evaluate qualifications obtained abroad and how particular work experience in the country of origin relates to occupations on the Dutch labour market. Moreover, the remit of local authorities to spread permit holders throughout the country is sometimes an obstacle to targeted placement. As a consequence, the envisaged match between the characteristics of the permit holder and the region is not always achieved.

To determine whether a targeted placement policy warrants broader implementation, more information is needed about the scope for and results of this policy in the Netherlands. First and foremost, more understanding is needed of the impact of the placement policy on permit holders’ position on the Dutch labour market; does the expected positive impact manifest itself in practice? Efforts are under way in the Netherlands and elsewhere to determine whether a match between a person’s characteristics and those of a region can be achieved through smarter, quantitative methods. The findings of this research could be important in removing obstacles to implementation. More clarity is also needed on whether a targeted placement policy leads to concentrations of high and low-opportunity permit holders. This could potentially have consequences for the public support for providing housing for permit holders in certain regions where lower-opportunity permit holders are housed. A period of reflection is therefore required before further choices can be made about a targeted placement policy, in which issues regarding implementation problems, the potential impact on public support for this policy and understanding its effectiveness are weighed against each other.

Closer links between reception, housing and civic integration policy

Based on agreements set out in the Coalition Agreement, a start was made last year on creating a more flexible asylum process (*Flexibilisering Asielketen*). This is intended to lead to a number of key changes in the asylum and reception policy, including increasing the participation opportunities during the reception period. The intention is to draw a distinction between asylum seekers with a high and low chance of having their application approved. Asylum seekers with a good chance of being approved would be moved to smaller reception centres close to the municipality which will later house them. They could immediately begin language lessons there and contact could be made with the future ‘host’ local authority whilst they are still in the reception centre (through the ‘broad intake’ programme used by local authorities under the new civic integration policy). The intention is also that, when placing high-opportunity asylum seekers, account should be taken of their employment qualifications and the local jobs supply. The reception, housing and civic integration policy will thus be brought more into line with each other. A comprehensive implementation agenda was recently formulated in this regard by the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (vng). It marks a first step towards an overarching approach to reception, housing and integration. The aim is to pursue a cohesive policy in collaboration with other partners which helps foster public support for both the reception of asylum seekers and the housing, integration and acceptance of permit holders. This is, in other words, a

policy pursued from the perspective of both the permit holder and the host community. Creating support within municipalities is important here, according to the vng, because it encourages implementing agencies to make a substantial contribution to the integration process of this group.

The design of this new policy is promising. It forms a basis for a structural policy of making better use of the period spent in reception by using small-scale reception facilities, offering language lessons to high-opportunity asylum seekers and establishing early contact between asylum seekers and the municipality where they will eventually be housed. This gives tangible form to the idea of not losing any time and pursuing a genuinely integrated policy. Through the vng, municipalities have endorsed the importance of this approach. There are however also some caveats. Implementation of the new policy is still in an early phase and it will be some time before it is fully operational. In that sense, a lot of time has already been lost. Structural activities to promote an active reception period will therefore continue to be important in the coming years. There are also a number of lessons to be learned. Evaluation research on projects carried out in recent years shows that local authorities often fail in their efforts to carry out the intake process whilst asylum seekers are still in a reception centre. We have also already highlighted the problems of implementing a targeted placement policy ('better match') and a policy of promoting an active reception period.

3 Civic integration policy

The present Civic Integration Act expires on 1 January 2022, and will be missed by almost no one. The present Act places a heavy responsibility on permit holders to choose a suitable language course in a market of providers that is often opaque and delivers too little quality. Several critical evaluations in recent years have highlighted the shortcomings of this legislation. Some of these evaluations have expressed the fear that large numbers of people on civic integration programmes would not pass their civic integration exams in time and would therefore receive a fine. In the event, this has not happened: the vast majority have completed the civic integration programme on time, though at a relatively low language level (A2), and a sizeable group have been exempted and fulfilled the civic integration requirement in that way. Older people, lower-educated people and people in poorer health are relatively often exempted from the civic integration duty, mainly based on an assessment that they would not be able to pass the examination. Research has shown that completing the civic integration process successfully is associated with an improved command of Dutch and has a positive effect on the person's labour market position. By contrast, exemptions have a strongly negative impact on the improvement of the command of Dutch.

New legislation: high expectations thanks to well-substantiated choices...

The new Civic Integration Act which comes into force on 1 January 2022 was designed to remove the problems in the current legislation and to add elements intended to foster the integration process of permit holders. As a result, the new Act creates a much better impression than the present legislation. Control is being returned to local authorities, with less emphasis on permit holders having to take responsibility themselves. Local authorities will conduct a broad intake session with all asylum seekers with a duty to complete the civic integration programme, and will draw up a personal Participation and Integration Plan (PIP). Ideally, under the new Act the civic integration process will begin in the asylum seekers reception centre, creating a continuous line from reception centre to local authority (cf. the new asylum policy). The selection of language providers by the local authority is intended to ensure that the quality of the language courses on offer improves and to consign the excesses of the market to the past. The frequently advocated dual trajectories have been given a place in the new Act, underlining the greater emphasis placed on participation in the new Act. It also aligns with the preference of many permit holders and makes it easier to achieve a more parallel approach. This dual approach has been common practice for much longer in countries such as Austria, Sweden and Denmark. The aim of maximising the group who integrate at language level B1 is in line with the desire of many permit holders to gain a better command of Dutch and increases their chances of participating in education and the labour market. Research has time and again underlined the wide differences between permit holders: a differentiated group demands differentiated policy. The choice for three learning pathways (the B1 route, the Education route and the Z route) is a response to this. The creation of the Education route is an important step, which is intended to improve the link to the Dutch education system through language bridging programmes. If all goes to plan, this will increase the number of permit holders entering education. It is hoped that it will also lead to a better match between the educational intake level and the capacities of permit holders, and be less a product of language disadvantage than is currently often the case. One positive element is that exemptions due to demonstrable effort are no longer permitted, so that permit holders who find it less easy to learn the language will still be a focus of the policy; the Z route is targeted at them.

... but the Act has yet to prove itself in practice

The new Civic Integration Act is thus closely aligned to the research findings and practical experiences of different parties, and addresses a range of problem areas in the previous Act. The Act provides a good basis for the coming years, and expectations in government are high. Whether those expectations will be met will depend largely on the Act's implementation. And that implementation is difficult, as evidenced among other things by an evaluation study of a large-scale integration programme in Rotterdam. That programme resembles the new civic integration policy in several respects (organisation and supervision of the language courses offered, intensive counselling, integrated approach). Yet the results of permit holders on this programme are no better than those of their counterparts who are covered by the regular municipal policy. Even with a watertight design, the imple-

mentation sometimes falls short, as implementers run into complex problems, intensive policy suppresses initiative and effectiveness depends on the quality delivered by specific organisations, such as language schools. Experience has been gained in recent years in several programmes and initiatives which incorporate elements of the new Act, such as carrying out the intake procedure in the asylum seekers centre and organising dual trajectories. In practice, these activities are often difficult to achieve; what looks promising on paper does not always turn out well in practice because of problems in implementation. Added to that are the high levels of ambition formulated in the new Act, including as regards civic integration at B1 language level. Practice in recent years has shown that this is a difficult goal to achieve, with few permit holders integrating at that level. A high level of ambition places high demands on the implementation.

Earlier experiences with decentralisation operations also offer a caveat to excessively high expectations. The new Civic Integration Act is a partial decentralisation operation, which assigns new tasks to local authorities. Earlier decentralisation operations (Social Support Act, Participation Act and Youth Act) have not produced the results that were envisaged on their introduction. On top of that, to a large extent the knowledge of and experiences with the integration of newcomers in local authorities will largely have to be built up again from scratch.

[Alert to the implementation and outcomes of the policy](#)

After a long incubation period, the new Civic Integration Act will be launched on 1 January 2022. It is high time, because there has long been a consensus about the need to replace the current Act. As stated, the choices made in formulating the new Act mark a clear improvement in many areas. The concerns about the operation of the Act relate mainly to the achievability of the ambitions and the complexities of implementation. In this regard, it is very important that local authorities monitor the design and implementation of the new Civic Integration Act and, where necessary, use the insights to make adjustments to the policy. Interim evaluation of progress is also an explicit component of the new Act, based on a 'learning and adaptive' approach. There are also lessons to be drawn from the experiences gained by local authorities in the design and implementation of the new Act. This will require research on the differences in implementation practices (process evaluation) and differences in outcomes (impact research). The selected outcome indicators are not only concerned with the permit holder (e.g. language achievements, labour market position), but also the community (e.g. mutual contacts, opinions on the presence of refugees in the neighbourhood). It is important that the process evaluation and impact research are carried out in tandem. A great deal of research has been carried out in relation to the civic and social integration of permit holders in recent years, but in the vast majority of cases these were process evaluations which described problem areas and learning points in implementation practice. They did not draw a link with the outcome indicators, and therefore generated fewer insights into the effectiveness of policy. The effectiveness of the new Civic Integration Act will largely depend on the timely identification of problems and the options for resolving them.

Reception, housing and civic integration policy: coordination between collaborating parties

The new civic integration and reception policy involves different layers of government and other stakeholders more than previously. National government is responsible for the configuration of the policy and sets the financial parameters, while implementation takes place at local level, with local authorities working alongside organisations such as the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) and the Education Executive Agency (DUO). This all requires coordination and administrative deftness. To make this possible, periodic consultations are held where the stakeholders make agreements on the design and implementation of the reception and civic integration policy. For example, the National Coordination Meeting (Landelijke Regietafel) takes decisions on local authorities' remit and on the distribution of permit holders across Dutch municipalities. Government departments, local authorities (via the Association of Netherlands Municipalities, VNG), provincial authorities (via the Association of Provincial Authorities, (IPO)) and the COA all take part in these meetings. Consultation on the labour market position of persons with a migration background, including permit holders, takes place in the context of the Labour Market Integration Programme (VIA), in which various bodies are represented including government departments, employers and employees, the Association of Directors of Social Services (Divosa) and the Dutch Council for Refugees (VluchtelingenWerk). There are three working groups which are drawing up a working agenda for the coming years. As part of this exercise, a Work and Integration Taskforce has been set up, with the Minister of Social Affairs and Employment as a member. As outlined above, the VNG has recently formulated an implementation agenda calling for an integrated approach to the reception, housing and integration policy, which stresses the importance of collaboration between the various stakeholders. In preparation for the new Civic Integration Act, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment has set up a pilot programme on introducing changes into the civic integration process (Veranderopgave Inburgering (VOI)). Divosa, VNG, the Ministry and participating local authorities are all taking part in this programme. The pilots are intended to generate knowledge about the best way to configure the new civic integration system.

4 Health policy

Considerable problems with (mental) health, but little policy

Permit holders face serious health problems, in particular with their mental health. These are caused by the experiences of refugees before and during their flight, but also after their arrival (for example including a long and uncertain period waiting for their asylum request to be processed). Research in other European countries similarly highlights a substantial risk of psychological complaints or disorders. Obesity, smoking and substance use are also more common among permit holders. A relatively high proportion of permit holders also have poorer oral health compared with the general population; Limited oral care in the countries of origin combined with poor hygiene during their flight lead to oral neglect and an above-average incidence of pain and other complaints among permit holders.

Health policy aimed at permit holders is largely local, as it is in other European countries, too. The underlying policy assumption here is that the general national health policy is adequate for all citizens. The emphasis on local implementation of health policy has led to variation in policy and care provision between municipalities. Despite numerous initiatives and programmes, there is little clarity regarding their effectiveness and reach. One key problem is a shortage of specialist, culturally sensitive care provision, for example in relation to post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) or processing trauma. To the extent that attention is devoted to these issues, it takes the form of specific, largely local or small-scale programmes or courses, making it difficult to embed this specialist knowledge and skill in mainstream policy. Permit holders make little use of mental health care services, which suggests underuse given their relatively poor mental health. Little attention is also given to preventing health problems among permit holders, while several lifestyle factors (smoking, lack of exercise) have a negative effect within this group. More attention is needed for avoiding preventable health problems; extra investments in prevention are needed for the risk areas discussed here: oral care, obesity, substance use, smoking (especially among young refugees) and mental health.

More attention for health via the new Civic Integration Act

The aim of the new Civic Integration Act is that local authorities should devote attention during the intake procedure to the health of permit holders and take this into account when determining their care need and formulating the Participation and Integration Plan (PIP). Because local authorities will be interviewing all newcomers with a duty to complete a civic integration programme, this offers more opportunities to devote attention to physical and/or mental health problems and their impact on the ability of permit holders to learn or work, and therefore on the choice of civic integration route; a good assessment of their health situation can help ensure that permit holders integrate at the right level. Good experiences have been gained in both Sweden and the Netherlands with the deployment of key individuals from the origin group during the integration process and as mediators in contacts with health institutions. These individuals could be deployed more widely.

Health policy for permit holders mainly local policy

Although the wider scope offered by the new Civic Integration Act to devote attention to the health permit holders is a step in the right direction, it fails to address a number of issues, especially in relation to mental ill-health. This has implications for the supply of specialist care and the accessibility of mental health care services, both after placement in a municipality and during the initial reception period. Discussing health problems requires the building of a relationship of trust, and this is especially important when it comes to mental health. Several professionals and other voluntary or professional support workers play a role here, for example municipal client managers, language teachers and social support workers. Several local authorities use culturally sensitive training programmes to further improve their support, and several municipalities have also had positive experiences with the use of key persons to act as a bridge between permit holders and the Dutch care

system. The wide deployment and funding of professional interpreters could also be an important means of preventing language problems impeding access to and provision of care. In practice, however, there are limited resources to pay for interpreters, which naturally impedes access to these services.

Attention for preventing health problems is also important. Prevention involves not just preventing the onset or recurrence of complaints, but also things such as promoting good health and strengthening people's own resilience. Many local authorities are already investing in a healthy lifestyle, for example by providing information on smoking and mental health complaints, encouraging exercise and offering social support. Some interventions can be funded through health insurance, while others (such as psychosocial interventions) are more dependent on local authority funding. This results in local differences and a fragmented approach. In our view it is important that the knowledge and experiences gained are shared more widely and that more attention is given to gaining clarity regarding effectiveness.

5 Education policy

The importance of holding a Dutch qualification for the integration of permit holders cannot be overstated. It greatly increases the chance of finding work which matches the permit holder's training and education level. We identified two problems relating to entering the Dutch education system. First, there is the high intake into the lower levels of secondary education (practical education and the lowest track of vocational training). This is probably due to the inadequate command of Dutch among young permit holders rather than a reflection of their cognitive abilities. The result is that young permit holders do not end up in the most appropriate form of education. This leads to longer school careers and a greater risk of premature dropout. A second issue is the low educational participation of permit holders who are not of compulsory schooling age.

Match education level as closely as possible to cognitive abilities

Given these problems, the education policy targeting permit holders is not well developed. It is fragmented and there appear to be wide regional differences. More attention could be given to improving the command of Dutch among young permit holders (who do not have a civic integration duty), so that they are able to enter secondary education at a level that is better suited to their cognitive abilities. Increasing the number of language-bridging programmes in schools could improve accessibility further. These programmes are currently offered by some senior secondary vocational colleges, universities of applied sciences and universities, but by no means cover the entire educational spectrum. They appear to work well in practice, warranting their broader use. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science could take the lead here.

Higher educational participation via the ‘education route’

As stated earlier, the inclusion of the Education route in the new civic integration policy is a positive step. This route is aimed at enabling permit holders to obtain a Dutch educational qualification. Candidates follow a language-bridging programme, after which they can transfer to a Dutch education programme. This is an important step in promoting the educational participation of permit holders and thereby boosting the number of them who hold a Dutch qualification. Sweden has for some time operated a system with a close relationship between civic integration and education, and this contributes to the relatively high educational participation of permit holders there. As part of the civic integration process, permit holders can be referred to adult education. Sweden also has local dual trajectories in which following a course of education is combined with gaining work experience with the future employer.

6 Labour market policy

Lots of policy focusing specifically on permit holders ...

A great deal of policy has been set in motion in recent years focusing on labour market participation. This is clearly a different situation from the policy aimed at improving the educational position and health of permit holders. Local authorities have a high degree of freedom in the way they help permit holders into work. The Participation Act is one route, but local authorities are also deploying tools that are new or geared specifically to the target group. Various projects and programmes are also carried out at local level aimed at improving the participation of permit holders. A more targeted approach to improving the labour market position of permit holders aligns directly with the recommendations from the 2015 Policy Brief and marks a break with the idea which prevailed previously that the position of permit holders (and other migrant groups) can only be influenced through general policy.

... but no convincing evidence of its effectiveness

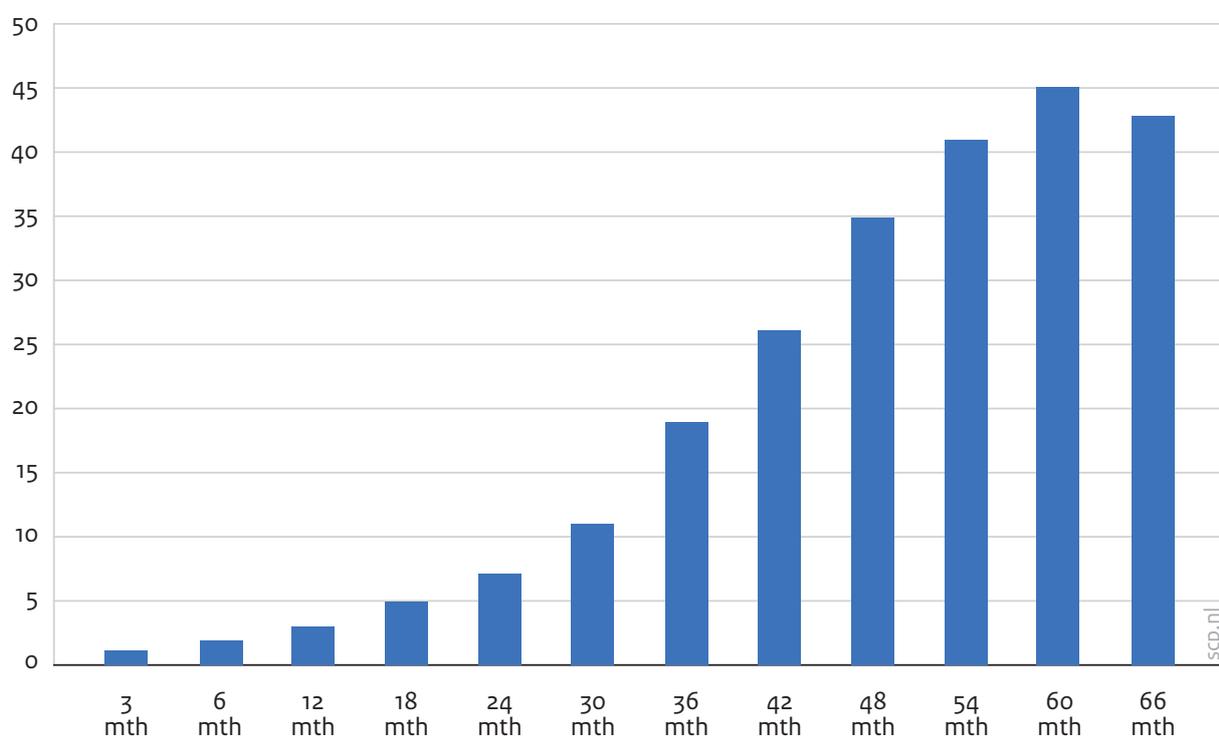
A fair amount of evaluation research has been carried out in recent years on labour market policy targeted at permit holders. That research has focused mainly on the implementation process and on identifying effective elements. This has produced a good deal of usable information on the design and implementation of the policy. However, what is broadly lacking is (quasi-)experimental impact research on differences in policy outcomes (among people who do and do not fall under a given intervention). It is therefore difficult to say whether these specific approaches have genuinely made a difference. There are also indications that these projects have mainly reached the more advantaged permit holders: men and well-educated permit holders appear to have received more support than those with low literacy, people with health problems and women.

... and the labour market participation of permit holders is fragile

Despite the large number of policy initiatives since 2015, the labour market position of permit holders remains concerning. Their labour participation rate has increased only very slowly in recent years (figure 1). In the first two years after receiving a permit, the labour participation rate is below 10% (figures relate to permit holders who received a permit in 2014). Five years after receiving a permit, 45% are in paid work. The coronavirus crisis has brought a halt to the increase in the labour participation rate of permit holders and turned it into a slight decline.

Figure 1

Share of working people among persons (18-65 years) who were granted an asylum permit in 2014, by number of months after receiving permit (in percentages)



Source: CBS (2021)

Although comparison with other European countries is difficult (different measurement years, measurement methods and definitions), we can say that the labour participation rate of permit holders in the Netherlands is low in the first years of their life in the Netherlands.

A further concern is that the increase in labour participation has occurred predominantly in small and temporary jobs: 73% of working permit holders are in part-time employment, and 84% are on temporary contracts (cohort of permit holders who have received a permit since 2014; figures for first half of 2020). This is a major reason why work is the most important source of income for only 26% of working permit holders (of the 2014 cohort, five years after receiving their permit), whereas 45% of them are in employment. Only a third of working permit holders are in employment every month over the course of a year;

they are frequently on short-term contracts, with frequent job changes. Although the labour participation rate of permit holders rises with their time spent in the Netherlands, their position on the labour market is not stable and their income from employment is often lower than the amount they receive on benefits.

Major policy efforts have been made in recent years, and in that light it is hard to avoid a degree of pessimism about the labour market participation rate of permit holders. That tells us nothing about the effectiveness or otherwise of the policy, because we do not know what the situation would have been without the policy interventions. It does however give an indication of the challenge in unlocking the labour participation of permit holders in the first years after arriving in the Netherlands. The ‘refugee entry effect’ has also been strong in the recent period: as a result of impediments that apply specifically for refugees (including traumas caused by their flight, the negative impact of the reception period, the initial lack of social networks), they make little headway with integration during their first years in the Netherlands.

Improving labour market position still an important policy challenge

The labour market position of permit holders is fragile, and all manner of obstacles make it difficult for them to find paid work. Policy attention for improving their labour market position is therefore key. Compared with the present Civic Integration Act, which is focused predominantly on learning Dutch, the emphasis in the new Act is much more on participation. This will hopefully help to improve the labour market position of permit holders. As already discussed, the intention is that the integration policy will make more frequent use of dual trajectories, in which permit holders combine learning the language with volunteering, working or following education. This illustrates the shift in policy from a primary focus on language teaching to attaching increased importance to participation, including on the labour market. This puts the participation policy on a more structural footing. In addition to the integration policy, policy attention for labour market participation is still important. In recent years, this attention has been channelled through the Participation Act or in separate projects and initiatives. Compared with a number of years ago, the sense of urgency regarding the labour market integration of permit holders appears to have faded somewhat, and numerous local initiatives have now ended. The coronavirus crisis has also played a role here; the pandemic has made implementing specific programmes more difficult, caused delays or led them to be postponed or halted. More than in the past, the policy needs to focus on those permit holders who are at a (greater) distance from the labour market, such as the low-educated, women and people with health problems. The policy also needs to focus more on the demand side. Policy in recent years has predominantly targeted supply-side aspects (e.g. language, social networks, employee skills), with less attention being given to employers and achieving a match between permit holders and employers. However, effective policy demands a combination of an approach focused on both the supply side and the demand side.

7 A question of implementation. New policy based on the right principles, but much will depend on its implementation

This policy brief examines what developments have taken place in policy in recent years. By relating those developments to research on policy implementation and research on the developments in the position and life situation of permit holders and the factors that influence it, the following conclusions can be drawn as regards pointers for policy.

1 Make a success of the new Civic Integration Act

The new Civic Integration Act offers a new and promising basis for policy aimed at the integration of permit holders. Many of the observed issues are addressed in the new Act (including more support and less emphasis on permit holders' own responsibility, testing the quality of language teaching, aiming for dual trajectories, the Education route with bridging programmes and the Z route in order to reach the largest possible target group). It is a broad-based piece of legislation which offers opportunities for influencing permit holders' command of the Dutch language, their health and their participation in education and on the labour market.

In terms of its design, the new Civic Integration Act is a major step in the right direction, but this does not guarantee that it will be effective. The biggest challenge for the coming years is to make this Act success. Even well thought-through legislation needs to be implemented adequately in order to be effective. Given the complexity of early integration processes for permit holders and the high level of ambition in the new Act, it is very important that the implementation and results of the integration policy are monitored intensively and that its effectiveness is evaluated. The findings of that research should then be used to make adjustments to the design and implementation of the Act.

2 Reception and housing policy: moving towards closer links, but waiting times a big problem

Several factors have characterised the reception and housing policy in recent years: a sharp increase in waiting times in reception centres; increased opportunities to carry out activities whilst in reception; a more targeted placement policy; and formulation of policy intended to strengthen the links between the reception, housing and integration policies. The results of all this have been mixed.

– Make the time spent waiting in reception as short as possible

The increasing length of time permit holders spend in reception facilities has a demonstrably negative impact on their well-being and mental health, and slows down the integration process once they move out of reception: a long time spent in reception correlates negatively with command of the Dutch language and labour market participation. Shortening the time spent in reception is very important for the successful integration of permit holders.

– More information is needed about the implementation and impact of targeted placement policy

More information is needed to enable a decision to be made about continuing the introduction of a placement policy that aims to achieve a match between the characteristics of the permit holder and those of the labour market region. Among the questions that need to be answered are how bottlenecks in implementation can be removed, what impact this policy will have on public support and how effective this form of placement policy is in improving the labour market position of permit holders.

– Increase opportunities for participation during reception

Promoting participation is an objective of the reception policy to a greater extent than in the past. Research has shown that this contributes to the integration process of permit holders. Expanding the opportunities to follow language lessons or carry out (voluntary) work during the reception period is therefore desirable.

These recommendations align partly with developments in relation to the new asylum policy, which among other things aims to increase the opportunities for asylum seekers with a good chance of acceptance to spend their time in reception usefully and to make an early start on integration. The idea of creating smaller reception facilities close to the municipality where they will ultimately be housed is that local authorities will come into contact with asylum seekers at an early stage who will be coming to live in their municipalities, and that this will enable the integration process to be started earlier. This will strengthen the links between reception policy and civic integration policy. Although implementation has begun, in many respects we are only at the start as regards this new policy. As with the integration policy, it is important to monitor the implementation closely so that any issues can be resolved quickly.

3 Health and education: increase accessibility and reduce local differences

There is relatively little health and education policy focusing specifically on permit holders. There are wide local differences, which appear to depend on more or less chance efforts by institutions or local authorities. The new civic integration policy offers local authorities the tools to devote attention to the health status and educational position of permit holders, but some topics take precedence over the integration policy. There are issues with accessibility in both sectors which demand a solution. The main issues in education are to do with ensuring that permit holders enter the education system at a level that matches their cognitive ability. In the health sector, accessibility problems appear to be concentrated in mental health care services. The Ministries of Education, Culture and Science and of Health, Welfare and Sport could take the lead here, working with other parties to examine ways of tackling these issues.

4 Continue to stimulate participation, including attention for the demand-side

The labour market position of permit holders is precarious, including those who have lived in the Netherlands for some time. The coronavirus crisis has put that position under even

more pressure. The new civic integration policy will hopefully provide a boost for the participation of permit holders, but specific attention will still be needed even after the civic integration process is complete. In particular, there is a need for policy attention targeting those who are in the most disadvantaged position. Much of the policy pursued in recent years has predominantly focused on strengthening the supply-side characteristics (i.e. of permit holders), such as learning the Dutch language and expanding their social networks. These are undoubtedly important aspects, including in the eyes of permit holders themselves, but are also indicative of a one-sided perspective. Successful policy also requires that impediments on the demand side are removed. While investing in permit holders is important, so is ensuring that institutions are sufficiently accessible. Policy focused on the diversity and inclusion of labour organisations, but also of education and care institutions, for example, is also a key part of integration policy.

Finally: are we doing the right things and are we doing them right?

Are we doing the right things and are we doing them right? That is the classic question when evaluating developments in policy. The answer to the first part of this question is predominantly positive; many of the issues highlighted by research, several of which were also raised in the 2015 Policy Brief, are addressed in the new Civic Integration Act and in the new asylum policy. That is unequivocally a good thing, though with the caveat that it has taken a long time to get to this point, whereas the diagnosis has been broadly known for a long time. Whether we will do the 'right things' going forward is the big question for the coming years. This policy brief devotes a lot of attention to research on the implementation of policy, and time and again it transpires that this implementation is not without its problems. Policy that is focused on doing the right things does not by definition lead to positive results. Implementation is complex, things turn out differently from what was hoped and approaches prove to work less well than anticipated. That will be no different in the years ahead.

As well as its implementation, the perspective of the policy also warrants attention. Currently, the perspective is predominantly that of permit holders themselves, with relatively limited attention for the host society. According to the Amsterdam professor Halleh Ghorashi, a strong focus on permit holders or, more broadly, on people with a migration background is a characteristic feature of Dutch integration policy. That policy is based on notions of disadvantage, in which migrants are seen primarily as needing help and culturally different. The implication of this thinking in terms of disadvantage is that processes of inclusion and exclusion on the part of the host society and its institutions are ignored in policy, whereas they are of great importance for the integration process. This not only impacts on the opportunities for participation and the bridging effect of social contacts but also, as research has shown, on the sense of belonging to and being accepted by the host society, on mental health and on institutional trust. Policy attention for the host society is also important in another respect. The Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG) has called for a cohesive policy which devotes attention not just to permit holders, but also to

building support in implementing organisations and among local residents. Integration is a two-sided process, and good policy should devote attention to both sides.