

## Finnish Integration Policy

Markus Seppelin  
Ministry of Social Affairs and Health

### Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers

The Finnish integration policy is based on the Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers. The Act came into force in 1999, and since then it has been amended several times. It regulates also the reception of asylum seekers, reception of beneficiaries of temporary protection as well as assistance for victims of trafficking.

Measures promoting and supporting integration are generally available to persons who have moved to Finland and have a municipality of residence in Finland under the Municipality of Residence Act. In general, costs incurred in the course of activities under this Act are met from the state budget. The Act does not preclude access to supportive measures, services or cash benefits laid down elsewhere in legislation, unless otherwise provided in the Act.

#### Responsibilities of authorities

The successful implementation of integration policies requires a close collaboration between different authorities. The responsibilities of different authorities are defined by the Act. The Ministry of the Interior is responsible for the general development, planning, steering, monitoring and coordination of the integration of immigrants. The regional Centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment are responsible for coordination of the integration of immigrants. Employment and Economic Development Offices are responsible, for the provision of labour market services promoting and supporting the integration of immigrants, of instruction in reading and writing and of basic education for immigrants registered as jobseekers.

Municipalities are responsible for drawing up, implementing and developing an integration programme and for monitoring its implementation and impact. An integration programme is drawn up to promote and support the integration of immigrants. The programme contains a plan concerning both the measures, services, cooperation and responsibilities involved in promoting and supporting integration, and consideration for the needs of immigrants in planning and organising other public services and measures. It also covers the promotion of ethnic equality and good ethnic relations, and the prevention of discrimination.

#### Measures and services supporting integration

The measures and services promoting and supporting integration may 1) provide guidance, advisory services and information services; 2) provide information about Finnish society and how it functions; 3) provide Finnish or Swedish language teaching; 4) provide adult skills training and take appropriate labour market policy measures; 5) provide instruction in reading and writing,

and teaching to augment basic education; 6) provide interpretation services; 7) take measures and provide services to promote equality in all its forms; 8) take measures and provide services to meet the special needs of immigrant minors; 9) take measures and provide services for special-needs groups; 10) take other measures and provide services that encourage immigrants to acquire for themselves the skills and knowledge needed in society.

## Integration plan

An integration plan is a personalised plan drawn up for individual immigrants covering the measures and services to promote and support their opportunity to acquire a sufficient command of Finnish or Swedish and other knowledge and skills required in Finnish society and working life, and to promote and support their opportunity to participate in society. The integration plan also takes into account measures and services to promote and support the integration of an immigrant's family. An integration plan may involve basic education, vocational education, upper secondary education, studies leading to a higher education degree, continuing education or further training.

Employment offices decide whether each individual measure to promote integration, provided by the municipality or organised by the immigrant independently, may be considered labour market training or a labour market measure. An integration plan is drawn up jointly by the immigrant, the municipality and the employment office. If the immigrant does not require municipal social services, the immigrant and the employment office may draw up the plan between themselves. If the immigrant is not required to register as an unemployed jobseeker under section 2a of the Act on Social Assistance, the immigrant and the municipality draw up the plan between themselves.

An immigrant's right to an integration plan lasts for three years from his or her initial entry in the Population Information System in his or her first municipality of residence. This period may be extended by a maximum of two years if necessary. The prolonged period is possible, if necessary for the immigrant to learn to read and write or to complete basic education, or if necessary because of the age of the immigrant or an injury or illness or a need related to child protection measures, or for the duration of the equivalent of maternity or paternity leave, or on similar reasonable grounds. An integration plan shall be drawn up at the latest when the immigrant has been unemployed or has been receiving social assistance for an uninterrupted period of two months. In case of immigrants under 18 years of age, an integration plan shall be drawn up when two months have passed from a request. The minor immigrants themselves or their parents can request drawing up an integration plan providing that the municipality considers it beneficial. The aim is to guide the immigrant into activities promoting and supporting integration within one month of drawing up the integration plan.

The amendment, duration and suspension of an integration plan are subject to negotiation between the immigrant and the authorities involved in drawing up the plan. The decision on the amendment, duration and suspension of an immigrant's integration plan is taken by the employment office or the municipality.

## Integration assistance

Integration assistance is financial support paid to an immigrant to ensure that he or she has secure means of support for the duration of the integration plan. Integration assistance consists of labour market support under the Unemployment Security Act and social assistance under the Act on Social Assistance. Immigrants are entitled to integration assistance for the same period as they are entitled to an integration plan. Immigrants are granted integration assistance when their integration plan has been agreed upon. In order to retain their right to integration assistance, immigrants shall report on the progress of their integration plan, any need for change and any interruption, as agreed in the plan.

## Overall reform of the Integration Act and related provisions

The Ministry of the Interior has referred a Government Proposal for reforming the Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers for a round of opinions. The new Act would be titled "Act on Promoting Integration". Under this proposal, the Integration Act would in the future apply to all immigrants who have a valid residence permit or registered right of residence. Integration measures currently apply to immigrants who have registered as unemployed job-seekers or receive social assistance.

In the future, all immigrants would be given basic information about Finnish society and their rights and duties in connection with being issued a residence permit. They would also be informed about the available services and the integration system. An immigrant would also be entitled to an initial assessment, in which his or her needs for linguistic training and an integration plan would be evaluated. The duration of the integration plan would be determined on an individual basis, while the duration of the first plan would be a maximum of one year. The aim is to speed up integration and employment and to ensure that integration measures take the individual needs of each immigrant into consideration better than today.

The Act would also contain more detailed provisions on organising integration training. Learning Finnish or Swedish would be an essential part of the training, and language teaching would have to be organised according to recommendations issued by the National Board of Education. However, in Finland there are no mandatory language courses or tests for immigrants. As part of active labour market measures a person can be directed to language training if it is considered necessary in terms of improving his or her employment opportunities.

The minimum contents of integration programmes run by municipalities would be specified, and the integration programme should be part of budgetary planning in municipalities. Calculated compensations for municipalities would continue to be paid for three years after the allocation of refugees or persons having been given international protection to the municipality. However, according to the initial proposal, compensation for persons received within the annual quota of refugees would be paid for four years. The Centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment would have the task of drawing up multi-annual agreements with municipalities in their areas on allocating refugees to municipalities which, in addition to the integration programme, would be a precondition for the payment of compensations to municipalities.

It is difficult to estimate the total cost of integration measures due to the great variety of the inputs on the local level. It is generally acknowledged that the proposed extension of the scope of the target group of integration measures, the introduction of new measures as well as amplifying the existing actions require more resources for the integration of immigrants. Due to the fiscal restraints, the only way to get better results in integration policies is to make the activation efforts more efficient and cost-effective. The training programmes should correspond better to the needs of the immigrants and the requirements of the labour market. A better prioritisation of the target groups is also needed. The most difficult group in terms of integration is the so called temporary immigrants who have no intention to stay permanently in the country. Their problems often are rooted in lack of adequate motivation. However, they are entitled to the same integration measures as others.

In the Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers, the sections on reception of asylum seekers will be detached to form a separate Act. The purpose of this reform is to clarify the integration legislation and to bring more immigrants within the scope of services that promote integration. The reformation of the Integration Act is based on the idea of integration as a two-way process.

Provisions on Finnish citizenship are laid down in the Nationality Act. One of the requirements for acquiring Finnish citizenship is that the applicant must have satisfactory oral and written skills in the Finnish or Swedish language. Language proficiency can be demonstrated in many different ways. A government proposal for reforming the Nationality Act is under reading at the Parliament. The aim of the bill is to speed up the process of acquisition of Finnish citizenship in order to promote the inclusion of foreigners living permanently in Finland. The process should be as simple, consistent and explicit as possible. Therefore, the reform aims to consider naturalization as a tool for integration.

### **Integration experiments part of the proposal**

In connection with the reform of the Integration Act, the Government also intends to lay down provisions for an experiment entitled 'Included in Finland'. This experiment would enable municipalities to try out new methods of organising integration training for a fixed period.

## **Follow-up of the integration measures**

The Ministry of the Interior is currently developing regular follow-up system for integration measures with part-financing from the EU's Integration Fund. This system includes the essential indicators and immigrant barometer-studies. The project is at pilot stage during 2009-2010, and the results are therefore only indicative. The target groups in the immigrant barometer are the nationals of Russia, Turkey, Thailand and China - reason for this are the rules of the funding instrument.

The barometer-study indicated that the factors that promote integration in to Finnish society the most are: job, security, language skills in Finnish/ Swedish or language courses. Majority of the respondents feel that they cope fairly well with their Finnish/Swedish skills. Even though approximately 90 percent of the respondents feel safe, over 40 percent have experienced

discrimination which in their experience depends on ethnic grounds. The sense of security varied according to nationality and gender. Almost all of the respondents possess Finnish acquaintances and feel that they have been able to maintain their own culture and also to pass it on to Finns. Even though most have Finnish acquaintances, a third of the respondents did not know their suffrage. The various integration measures have remained unfamiliar to some part of the respondents: 40 percent do not know what the integration plan or Integration Act means, yet over 60 percent felt that public services have contributed to their integration considerably or quite much.

The results of the integration barometer cannot be as such generalized to all immigrant groups, since the target groups are limited because of the funding instruments rules, and the results can be over positive and also partly expected. For example there were many Chinese respondents, to whom it might not necessarily be as important to learn language and integrate in other respects for the reasons of temporary employment.

## **The role of Non-Governmental Organisations in Promoting the Integration of immigrants**

Besides the legal framework and official integration measures, there are a lot of project activities including voluntary work/volunteering to promote the integration of immigrants into the Finnish society. Development projects are carried out at different levels to support the local municipalities in their efforts to enhance the integration processes. European Union structural funds contribute annually up to about 10 million euros for local and national projects in the area. Finland's Slot Machine Association grants funding for work to promote health and social welfare. The total amount of the grants targeted to the NGOs' activities among immigrants has reached 10 million euros per year. The Ministry of Education and Culture grants discretionary subsidies for art, sport and youth work. A substantial part of the financial support granted for art, sport, research and youth work comes from the proceeds of the national pools and lottery Veikkaus. Also immigrant based NGOs are among the beneficiaries of those grants.