

Education of Migrants: A Social Investment

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Education is key to help migrants break out of social and economic disadvantage. Public spending on education of migrants can be a profitable social investment: it may yield long-term economic returns through accelerated growth and better sustainability of public finances. Closing gaps in language, cultural knowledge, and skills early is especially profitable. However, there are no “one size fits all” policies for better education of migrants, as populations with immigrant background in the Member States are highly diverse.

While international mobility has developed into a major driver of population change in the European Union, people with immigrant background in the Member States continue to be placed in disadvantaged socio-economic positions. Many native-born children of immigrants obtain lower levels of educational achievement than those of non-immigrant background. In consequence, migrant populations tend to show lower labor-market activity rates and income levels compared with non-migrant populations. They also tend to be exposed to higher risks of unemployment and depend on social welfare more often. Thus provision of better education to people with immigrant background is an important policy challenge for the European Union.

Education of migrants may have proportionally higher costs than for non-migrants. Migrants often carry experiences and face environments comparatively less conducive to skill development. They need to overcome disadvantages with respect to host-country specific skills and knowledge, and may induce costs in order to manage the additional linguistic or cultural diversity in the classroom.

THE ECONOMIC CASE FOR MIGRANT EDUCATION

Still, there is a strong case for raising educational outcome levels of the populations with immigrant background in Europe on economic grounds. Lasting positive growth effects may arise from skilled people

with immigrant background fostering innovation through enhanced diversity, entrepreneurship, or international investment and trade. Government budgets may improve as education usually generates positive net fiscal returns. A smaller share of low-skilled immigrants may also help reduce income inequality and make Europe more inclusive.

Most of the arguments in favor of better skills for migrants also apply to other people who are at disadvantage in European knowledge-based economies due to low levels of educational achievement. It is rather the content of the required interventions that makes migrants a special case. A foremost challenge is bridging language gaps. Another key challenge is compensating for loss of human capital that is not transferable across borders, and provision of host-country specific cultural capital – knowledge, skills, competencies, and values – that lays a basis for rapid learning in a foreign environment.

Early intervention appears to be the most efficient strategy to advance educational outcomes of migrants. This demands directing attention to integration and special tutoring of the second generation in kindergartens and elementary schools, but also to adult immigrants upon arrival, especially if they carry few professional qualifications from abroad. The returns to public resources devoted to immigrant education may not be immediately visible. They tend to grow over time and ultimately can become substan-

Activity rates of immigrants by educational attainment level in selected countries, 2014

	Lower education	Medium education	Higher education
Austria	54.8	76.7	83.3
Belgium	45.0	67.8	80.2
Bulgaria	–	66.7	76.2
Croatia	38.2	63.9	81.3
Cyprus	62.7	81,0	79.7
Czech Republic	44,0	80,0	84.9
Estonia	45.5	76.4	84.7
Finland	55.4	77.6	84.3
France	51.8	68.4	82.9
Germany	55.8	79,0	84.3
Greece	69.3	72.9	76.9
Hungary	32.8	67.4	81.9
Italy	57.5	73.2	77.1
Latvia	46.8	76,0	84.3
Lithuania	39.9	75.6	85.6
Luxembourg	51.4	71.6	87.6
Malta	59.5	68.8	81.2
Poland	38.2	58.5	87.8
Portugal	60.5	76.5	87.9
Romania	–	56.3	–
Slovakia	30.7	71.9	77.9
Slovenia	46.4	75,0	87.2
Spain	69.9	79.3	85,0
Sweden	62.4	81.4	88.8
United Kingdom	60.3	71.8	85.1

Activity rates: percentage of employed or unemployed persons in relation to total population of age 15 to 64 years. Immigrants include the foreign-born and the native-born with at least one foreign-born parent. Lower education: ISCED 11 levels 0-2; medium: 3-4; higher: 5-8. Source: Eurostat, LFS 2014 ad hoc module (online data code lfs0_14lacr).

tial. This makes immigrant education a social investment case: the expected future returns could justify public resources devoted to it today.

In making educational investments, policy-makers need to set priorities, as government resources are limited. Where budget constraints limit choices, one should ensure sufficient resources are provided for children with immigrant background at very young age. Furthermore, one should employ policies that target the groups of migrants benefitting the most from public education policies. This strategy demands effective profiling. Such profiling requires reliable

recognition of the formal certificates and more importantly of the skills that immigrants carry from abroad. Integration issues are partly related to a lack of information, rather than true lack of skills.

NO “ONE SIZE FITS ALL” POLICIES

In view of the large diversity of populations with immigrant background and their education achievements across the EU Member States, it is obvious that a “one size fits all” approach to education of migrants in Europe would be far from efficient. Instead, tailor-made local solutions are needed. Ideally, these should be embedded into a comprehensive strategy working against economic and social exclusion of migrants. For example, immigration policies securing residence status, labor market policies removing employment barriers and encouraging labor market participation, or town and country planning preventing ethnic segregation may help raise the individual and aggregate returns to education and thereby render specific policies in the domain of immigrant education more effective. As current knowledge about what works to promote economic and social inclusion of migrants is rather limited, fragmented, and case-specific, integration programs targeted at migrants in Member States should be subject to careful impact evaluation and ex-ante pilot testing before they are implemented in full. Expert networks fostering permanent sharing of collected experience and approaches across Member States and mutual learning activities would also be beneficial.

Advancing education of migrants is a considerable challenge for host countries. It requires coordination of different policy areas and involvement of many stakeholders. It also requires political stamina as positive effects probably arrive with long delay. In the long term, the overall gains for the economy may be substantial and warrant a strong focus on education policies fitting migrants. Better social integration via education may also help create more positive attitudes of European citizens towards people with immigrant background and immigration, in a time of rising international mobility and growing skepticism about foreigners.

For more details see: Holger Bonin, *The potential economic benefits of education of migrants in the EU*. EENEE Analytical Report 31, March 2017, http://www.eenee.de/dms/EENEE/Analytical_Reports/EENEE_AR31.pdf.