

Summary and conclusions

Policy in the starting blocks

The role of policy in developments in the position and life situation of Syrian asylum permit-holders

Jaco Dagevos and Willem Huijnk

S.1 Introduction

The purpose of the project ‘Longitudinal Cohort Study of Asylum-seekers and Asylum Permit-holders (see Box S.1) is to investigate the position and life situation of permit-holders and map any changes over time. This fourth quantitative study within that project is an explanatory study which focuses primarily on Syrian permit-holders. They are by far the biggest group of permit-holders who have come to live in the Netherlands in recent years. This study investigates what factors influence changes in the position and life situation of Syrian permit-holders, and looks in particular at the role of policy factors. The intention is to gain a better understanding of the crucial factors which can facilitate a good start. What works? And what does not?

Box S.1 Longitudinal Cohort Study of Asylum-seekers and Asylum Permit-holders

The purpose of the Longitudinal Cohort Study of Asylum-seekers and Asylum Permit-holders project is to map and track the position and life situation of asylum-seekers and permit-holders who have come to live in the Netherlands since 2014. The project is a joint initiative of four Dutch ministries (Social Affairs and Employment; Justice and Security; Education, Culture and Science; and Health, Welfare and Sport). The project draws on data from surveys, qualitative research and registers. The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) was asked to carry out a survey of Syrian permit-holders in partnership with the Research and Documentation Centre (WODC), the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) and Statistics Netherlands (CBS). The survey covers a cohort of Syrians who received an asylum residence permit between 1 January 2014 and 1 July 2016, and their children and partners who travelled to the Netherlands later as dependants or for family reunification. The first wave of the survey was administered in 2017, the second in 2019. Three quantitative studies have been published regarding these survey waves (Dagevos et al. 2018; Miltenburg et al. 2019; Dagevos et al. 2020). This publication is the fourth quantitative study. Qualitative research has also been carried out as part of the project (see Sterckx & Fessehazion 2018; Van Liempt & Staring 2020; Vermeulen 2021). Statistics Netherlands (CBS) has compiled a database of linked register data enabling the position of asylum-seekers and permit-holders to be tracked, and has published several reports on this (e.g. CBS 2019, 2020). The CBS databases contain information on all origin groups who came to the Netherlands as asylum migrants during the cohort period. The register data are linked to the above surveys among Syrian permit-holders.

In this study we draw mainly on data from two surveys held among the same group of Syrian permit-holders, in 2017 and 2019. This enables us to analyse developments in their positions and life situations. As this study uses longitudinal data and advanced analysis methods, we are better able than previously to make statements about the influence of policy, though caution is still called for. Selection effects can for example not be completely ruled out – for example the possibility that it is mainly highly motivated asylum-seekers in reception centres who take part in language courses. Effects attributed to policy should in that case in reality be ascribed (at least in part) to differences in motivation. It is not possible to determine to what extent such selection effects play a role in this study, and any statements about policy effectiveness are thus hedged in with a degree of uncertainty.¹

The data used relate to the period before the coronavirus crisis. This crisis has obviously also impacted on Syrian permit-holders in all kinds of ways, and in some areas they have been harder hit than other groups in the Netherlands. In the conclusion we accordingly place our findings and recommendations in the context of the coronavirus crisis.

Policy factors: three forms of policy

In this study we consider three forms of policy that permit-holders encounter during their first years in the Netherlands: reception policy, dispersal policy and civic integration policy.

Reception of asylum-seekers in the Netherlands

Asylum-seekers arriving in the Netherlands are housed in the central reception facility of the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA), before being subsequently transferred to an asylum-seekers reception centre. Earlier research has shown that long-term residence in a reception centre has a negative influence on the position and well-being of permit-holders. In this report we examine whether this also applies for the permit-holders in our study. The opportunities for asylum-seekers to be active during the reception period have expanded in recent years, for example learning the Dutch language and volunteering. The ‘Preparing for civic integration’ programme is aimed at permit-holders who are still living in an asylum-seekers reception centre and aims to prepare them for integration into Dutch society after they leave the centre. The programme lasts for fourteen weeks and includes Dutch language lessons, personal counselling and the provision of information about Dutch society and the labour market.

Dispersal policy: placement throughout the country

After obtaining an asylum residence permit, permit-holders relocate from the asylum-seekers reception centre to their own home in a Dutch municipality. A formula is used for this based on the number of inhabitants in a municipality, with larger municipalities being required to house more permit-holders than smaller municipalities. The result of this placement policy is that permit-holders end up dispersed throughout the country. The international literature contains more and more indications that this dispersal not only leads to inequality of opportunity – it makes a difference where an asylum-seeker ends

up – but also has a negative impact on the socioeconomic participation of permit-holders (CPB & SCP 2020), because municipalities and regions can differ in terms of their provisions, policy and labour market conditions. This study does not carry out stringent research on the effectiveness of dispersal policy, but rather examines to what extent there is a correlation between the region where a permit-holder ends up living and their labour market position. This offers an insight into the question of how much the dispersal policy – whereby permit-holders end up living dispersed throughout the country – contributes to differences in labour market position.

Civic integration policy

The Netherlands has had a policy of mandatory civic integration since 1998. The legislation has been amended several times since then, but the one constant is the emphasis on learning the Dutch language. The civic integration policy also aims to help increase newcomers' knowledge of Dutch society and strengthen their orientation towards the Dutch labour market. Since 2017, the requirement to sign a participation statement has also formed part of the civic integration process. Newcomers who are required to follow a civic integration programme must complete it within three years. Exemptions from this requirement can be granted on various grounds, for example health problems or demonstrable efforts made to pass the civic integration exam. Exemption can also be obtained if the newcomer has obtained a Dutch qualification or is following a Dutch course of education.

5.2 Summary of the chapters

Contributions for this study were provided by Statistics Netherlands (CBS), the Research and Documentation Centre (WODC), the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) and the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP). Below we summarise the key findings of each chapter in this report. The analyses simultaneously included individual and policy factors, providing us with a picture of the importance of the two types of factor. Based on the findings in the different contributions, we draw a number of more overarching conclusions. These concern the importance of individual and policy factors and home in on the interrelationships between the themes studied here (health, language and labour market position). We link our findings to pointers for policy, which we also place in the context of the current coronavirus crisis (5.3).

Chapter 2. The role of mental and physical health on successful integration into Dutch society (National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM))

The new civic integration system which comes into effect in the Netherlands in 2022 will give local authorities control over civic integration and participation by permit-holders. Among other things, it will introduce scope for a customised approach for permit-holders whose physical and/or mental health problems restrict their ability to learn or work. Health is an indicator which is relatively rarely included in research on civic integration, either in the Netherlands or elsewhere.

Physical health important for passing the civic integration exam

Poor subjective health, long-term chronic illness or conditions and impairments in daily functioning all reduce the likelihood of Syrian permit-holders passing the civic integration exam. Impairments in daily functioning are found to be an important impediment to successful integration in Dutch society; permit-holders with impairments more often fail the civic integration exam. It is plausible that there is a correlation with other underlying health problems, for example mental health issues. These are important findings for the new civic integration system which, as stated, introduces more scope for customisation, for example for people with health problems. Health also plays a role in receiving an exemption from the civic integration exam. Permit-holders with long-term illnesses or conditions and functional impairments are exempted from the exam more often than their peers without these health problems. This does not apply for permit-holders with poor subjective health or poor mental health.

Permit-holders who have sought help for mental health problems less often pass the civic integration exam. It is plausible that seeking help because of mental health issues is partly associated with the perceived severity of the complaints.

In this study we found a less clear-cut relationship between the mental health of the group of permit-holders as a whole and passing the civic integration exam. This does not tally with earlier findings in the literature, possibly because respondents in our study were asked about mental health in general, not about specific complaints. It is also possible that, for some permit-holders, following the civic integration programme has a positive impact on their mental health. The finding that permit-holders who have sought help for mental ill-health are less likely to pass the civic integration exam than their peers who have not sought this help suggests that this may not apply for permit-holders with severe complaints.

Chapter 3. Language with policy. Factors underlying the language improvement of Syrian permit-holders (scp and Significant Public)

We analysed the development in the command of the Dutch language among Syrian permit-holders between 2017 and 2019. We were particularly interested in the significance of three clusters of policy factors: the reception policy (duration of reception, number of relocations, following language lessons during the reception period and performing other activities), the civic integration policy and the participation policy (being active on the labour market or doing voluntary work as factors for improving the command of Dutch). There is a correlation between the improvement in command of Dutch and successful completion of the civic integration programme. The Dutch language skills of people who are exempted from the civic integration duty lag behind. As explained earlier, these are often people with health problems (long-term illness/conditions and functional impairments) and older persons – groups who are already less often successful in the civic integration exam. A long period spent in reception and frequent relocations between reception centres also does nothing to improve the Dutch language skills of Syrian permit-holders.

Participating in activities in the reception centre – and especially following language lessons – does by contrast contribute to improving their command of Dutch. Participation on the labour market and volunteering also go hand in hand with an improvement in Dutch language skills.

Policy factors are thus important. However, the analyses also show the great importance of individual factors. We find wide differences between Syrian permit-holders in the progress they make in their command of Dutch. Young people and highly educated permit-holders acquire a mastery of the language relatively quickly, regardless of the influence of policy. The time spent living in the Netherlands is also relevant; learning Dutch is to some extent an autonomous process which simply takes time.

Two chapters on labour market position

This report contains two chapters on labour market position, written from clearly different perspectives. Chapter 4 is based on register data and describes the factors that are associated with the chance of finding work. It also describes to what extent working permit-holders are successful in keeping their jobs and, where they do, whether they are able to improve their employment situation over time. This chapter looks not only at Syrians, but at all permit-holders who received a residence permit from 2014 onwards. Chapter 5 draws on data from the surveys held among Syrian permit-holders, in 2017 and 2019. It describes analyses of labour market participation in a broad sense (both looking for and being in paid work) and of a more extensive set of individual factors (e.g. language and health).

Chapter 4. Labour participation of permit-holders and their labour market dynamic (Statistics Netherlands (CBS))

Influence of factors on chance of finding work

The labour participation rate of permit-holders increases the longer they have been in the Netherlands. Having Eritrean or Afghan nationality, having passed the civic integration exam, holding a qualification obtained in the Netherlands and following a course of education in the Netherlands are all positively associated with the chance of being in work after 55 months. Men are in work more often than women. The labour participation rate increases with age up to 25, after which it falls again. The situational context also plays a role: the lower the unemployment rate in the municipality where permit-holders live, the greater the labour participation. Having a child is negatively associated with being in work; this effect is greater for women than for men.

We found no significant effect of bringing family over from the country of origin (dependants or reunifying family members). The length of time spent waiting for a residence permit also shows no correlation with having work. Naturalisation also has no effect, though during the study period only a small group had the opportunity to become naturalised.

High proportion of flexible jobs and job changes

One concerning finding is that permit-holders are mainly employed in sectors that are susceptible to economic developments, such as the hospitality industry, the temporary employment sector and the cleaning industry. Even during times of economic growth (2017-2019), the employment dynamic is high: only a third of working permit-holders are in work for every month during the course of a year. This translates into uncertainty, in terms of both job security and income. Despite losing their jobs, a high proportion of permit-holders quickly find work again with the same or another employer. Both the hourly pay rate and the size of the job increase over time.

Hourly pay rate of Syrian and Iranian permit-holders

The labour market participation of Syrian and Iranian permit-holders gets off to a slower start, and after 55 months is still lower than among their Eritrean and Afghan peers. On the other hand, Syrian and Iranian permit-holders have a higher hourly pay rate in their last job than Eritrean and Afghan permit-holders. This appears to suggest different integration patterns, with Syrian and Iranian permit-holders spending longer preparing for their labour market participation and then ending up in somewhat better jobs, while for Eritrean permit-holders in particular the priority is to have work, which often means taking temporary work with a lower hourly pay rate.

Chapter 5. What works? The influence of policy on the start of the employment career of Syrian permit-holders (SCP)

We know from earlier research that the longer Syrian permit-holders have spent in the Netherlands, the more likely they are to have completed their civic integration programme and to be in work (Dagevos et al. 2020). The latter is evident from the fact that the proportion of Syrians in paid work and the proportion wanting and available to work have both increased. This chapter focuses on this labour market participation in a broad sense by devoting attention both to having or finding paid work and to the orientation towards the labour market (wanting to work, able to work and available for work).

Policy matters: short and active reception period, successful civic integration and placement are all associated with a better labour market position

Several policy factors contribute to the better labour market position of Syrian permit-holders. A short and active reception period increases the chance of paid work, while completing the civic integration programme promotes both an orientation towards the labour market and participation in it. On the one hand, the integration programme will contribute to the building of post-migration human capital, such as learning Dutch and acquiring knowledge about Dutch culture. On the other hand, this finding illustrates the phased nature of the integration process: after completing the integration programme, they are ready for the step into paid work. The positive effect of the civic integration programme is greater for men than for women, and in this sense the integration policy appears to magnify differences in the labour market participation between the sexes. The setting where

someone ends up after placement also matters: the higher the unemployment rate in the region, the lower the chance that permit-holders will be in work or orientated towards the labour market.

Volunteering is not a stepping stone, but command of the language and health are conditions determining the labour market position

Contrary to expectations, volunteering proves not to be a stepping stone to paid work. It may be that volunteering mainly attracts those permit-holders for whom the step into work is too great; they are able to participate by volunteering, but our findings suggest a low rate of transfer into paid work. Voluntary work is not a valid alternative for paid work in terms of financial self-reliance. A better command of Dutch does lead to paid work and to a stronger orientation towards the labour market. Better mental health also increases the chance of being in work. The relevance of mental health for the participation of permit-holders was already known (De Vroome & Van Tubergen, 2010; Dagevos, 2011; Bakker et al. 2013); this study shows that physical health is also a relevant factor for labour market position. A further point for attention is that both the labour market participation and labour market orientation of female permit-holders are much lower than for male permit-holders.

Five years after the major influx, then, a proportion of permit-holders are in paid work. For others, this is not or not yet the case, due to a variety of circumstances (e.g. civic integration programme not yet complete; insufficient command of Dutch; problems with mental/physical health). Factors not included in the analyses, such as discrimination, can also play a role. It also remains to be seen what impact the coronavirus crisis will have on their labour market position; given their generally vulnerable position, the prospects here are not favourable.

Chapter 6. A good start: half the battle? The relationship between first experiences in the Netherlands and institutional trust and identification (Research and Documentation Centre (WODC))

Permit-holders who have positive experiences in both the initial phase (period spent in reception) and the subsequent phase (civic integration) go on to develop more trust in Dutch institutions and also identify (slightly) more strongly as being Dutch. Passing the civic integration exam has a further positive effect: permit-holders who have passed this exam identify more strongly as Dutch.

Positive experiences not only have an influence on trust in the institutions with which they have gained experience, but also in a broader sense on trust in institutions such as the government, media and judiciary. The objective characteristics of the first phase in the Netherlands, such as the duration of the procedure, the length of time spent in an asylum reception centre and the number of reception centres in which permit-holders have stayed, do not play a role for the Syrian permit-holders in this study in their later identification with the Netherlands or their trust in its institutions.

The high degree of institutional trust among permit-holders is a positive finding. It could be that permit-holders use their situation in Syria as a frame of reference; their experiences with Dutch institutions are likely to compare positively with the Syrian context. However, these permit-holders have only spent a relatively short time in the Netherlands, and it is too early to determine whether their trust in Dutch institutions will prove to be stable. How their institutional trust will develop as they spend longer living in the Netherlands, their frame of reference is less shaped by the situation in Syria and their potentially greater experience of discrimination, are questions for the future.

5.3 Conclusions and pointers for policy

Key conclusions

In this study we have sought to determine what factors influence the position and life situation of asylum permit-holders and changes in these aspects, with a particular interest in the influence of policy factors. Our findings suggest that policy has an influence on the position and life situation of permit-holders.

The findings with regard to the *reception policy* point to the importance of a short, active period in reception, with few relocations, for the command of Dutch and labour market participation. Volunteering during the reception period increases the likelihood of successfully completing the integration programme.

The result of the Dutch *placement policy* is that permit-holders end up dispersed throughout the country. Those who end up in regions with unfavourable labour market conditions are less likely to find work. That was obviously never the intention of this policy, but it is the implication of it.

Civic integration proves to be an important factor for labour market position (being in work and being active on the labour market). It contributes to post-migration human capital, and for many permit-holders completing the civic integration programme marks the starting point for their entry to the labour market. Completing the programme also promotes identification with the Netherlands. Command of Dutch improves more among those who have completed the civic integration programme than those who are still engaged in the programme. The slower improvement in the command of Dutch among those with an exemption from their civic integration duty is an indication of selectivity in the civic integration policy. Exemptions often apply for older people, low-educated people (including those who are illiterate) and people with poor health. These are groups who already find it more difficult to learn Dutch, and the exemption policy exacerbates this.

It is not just the 'objective' aspects of the policy that are important, but also how permit-holders experience the policy and how they are treated. This more 'subjective' side contributes to institutional trust and affinity with the Netherlands. The sociocultural and political dimensions of integration are thus influenced not just by how the policy is designed, but also how it is implemented.

Differences between permit-holders

As well as affirming the importance of policy, the analyses also reveal differences between (Syrian) permit-holders. Education level and period of residence are important factors for language acquisition. There is also a correlation between a person's health and age and their successful civic integration, improvement in command of Dutch and labour market position. There are clear differences between men and women as regards labour market position. Syrian permit-holders are a layered group, in which older people, lower-educated people, women and those in poor health integrate less rapidly and at a lower level. This applies for civic integration, language acquisition and labour market position.

The fact that (Syrian) permit-holders differ in the speed with which they are able to acquire a given position in Dutch society (civic integration, language level or labour market position) is an important consideration for policy. It means there are groups that lag behind, and the policy could devote particular attention to them. The fact that this does not always happen under current policy is evident from our finding that it is mainly weaker groups that are exempted from the civic integration duty, effectively marginalising them from the policy without achieving a minimum language level of A2 (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). Differentiation within the group creates a need for differentiated policy in terms of the instruments to be deployed, timing and objectives.

Considerations for policy

The importance of an intensive and customised civic integration policy

This study highlights the importance of civic integration policy and also its selective character in practice. The findings are important for the new civic integration system which comes into effect in 2022. The new system is built around three routes (the 'B1 route', the 'education route' and the 'self-reliance route', or Z-route), which are intended to better reflect the differentiation in education level and ability within the group of permit-holders, in terms of both activities and objectives (people in the Z-route, for example, do not need to take an exam). The decision to use three routes fits in well with our study findings. In the new system, the B1 route, which is intended to be the route followed by most candidates, combines learning the Dutch language with paid or voluntary work. The intention is to make more use of 'dual trajectories'. Our findings support this approach: participation on the labour market or as a volunteer contributes to learning the Dutch language.

A further positive development is the major curtailment of the scope for exemptions. In the new system, exemptions due to making demonstrable efforts will for example disappear. Our survey suggests that exemptions in the current system lead to a double disadvantage: the people who are exempted from their civic integration duty are often less healthy and older – groups who already find it difficult to learn the Dutch language. In the new civic integration system, these groups will be brought within the scope of the policy, and this will hopefully have a positive impact on their integration.

In the new system, control will be handed to local authorities (as was the case in the system that was in force prior to 2013). Part of the new process involves local authorities conducting wide-ranging intake interviews with every permit-holder, culminating in a personal Participation and Integration Plan (PIP), which sets out the agreements made on the learning route to be followed and the provider that will deliver the lessons. A series of progress interviews is also built in. Unlike the present system, the permit-holder thus receives support in choosing a language provider.

High expectations of the new system

The policy has high expectations of the new system. It has been developed over recent years in liaison with local authorities, implementing bodies, researchers and civil-society organisations, and comes into effect in 2022. It marks a clear break with the current civic integration system, which has been the subject of debate for some time (e.g. Algemene Rekenkamer [Netherlands Court of Audit] 2017; Blom et al. 2018; ACVZ 2019). Criticism focuses among other things on the heavy emphasis placed on newcomers taking responsibility for their integration themselves, forcing them to choose the most appropriate language course from a relatively intransparent market of language providers. In the new system, the local authority returns as a key link in the process, with responsibility not just for the intake and formulating the PIP, but also for selecting the language providers that will be allowed to provide the civic integration lessons in the municipality. This is intended to lead to a supply of good-quality language providers and a better match between those providers and participants in the civic integration programme. More intensive support and scope for differentiation are intended to contribute to a more efficient civic integration process and enable a high proportion of participants to achieve a higher language level (B1 rather than A2).

This study supports a number of the choices made for the design of the new system (e.g. dual trajectories, better support by the local authority and differentiation into three learning routes for participants in civic integration programmes). Time will tell how effective the new system proves to be.

Integration of newcomers is a complex undertaking which is bound up with numerous implementation difficulties. Not insignificant in this context is the observation that the reform of the civic integration policy is also a decentralisation operation, which places a large share of responsibility for implementing the policy back in the hands of local authorities. Whilst there are good reasons for doing this in relation to integration policy, experiences with other decentralisation operations in recent years (Social Support Act, Youth Act and Participation Act) do not give cause for optimism (Kromhout et al. 2020). In principle, the new civic integration system offers scope (because of the wide-ranging intake interviews, the PIP and the progress interviews) to devote attention to the issues encountered by permit-holders, including mental and physical health problems. At the same time, it places high demands on implementation by the local authority (KIS 2019). Recognising mental and physical health problems and ensuring adequate referral where necessary

demand the requisite expertise and the ability to refer permit-holders to suitable provisions, such as mental health care services (for which there are long waiting lists in many municipalities). Numerous initiatives have been taken in recent years to develop dual trajectories, but these are often beset by financial and organisational problems (Oostveen et al. 2018). The goal of raising the envisaged language standard to B1 for the majority of newcomers with a civic integration duty is understandable from the perspective of participation in society and the labour market, but the fact that a majority of those currently on civic integration programmes finish the programme at level A2 (Boot et al. 2020) is a clear signal that achieving B1 within three years is not attainable for many newcomers. These examples illustrate the complex challenges for the civic integration policy. The design choices made for the new system have been better thought through than in the present system, but the effect of the new policy will depend on how it is implemented.

Reception policy: short and meaningful

According to our study, the shorter the asylum procedure and the more meaningfully asylum-seekers spend their time, the better their command of Dutch and the better their labour market position will be. Given these findings, asylum-seeker reception policy can be seen as a form of integration policy. This study thus provides support for the policy of recent years which has expanded the possibilities for undertaking activities during the reception period. An example of such a policy is the ‘Preparation for integration’ (also referred to as ‘pre-integration’) programme, which enables permit-holders to begin following lessons to improve their command of the language and learn about Dutch society and the labour market whilst they are still in the reception centre. An evaluation has shown that, in the assessment of those concerned, the pre-integration programme contributes to their language acquisition, but that several improvements could be made (Blom et al. 2018; Bakker et al. 2020). The language gains are often limited and frequently below the envisaged target level (A1-minus). Moreover, not all participants complete the full programme. The goal of using the pre-integration programme to create a ‘continuous learning pathway’ to the regular integration programme is often not achieved.

This study also illustrates the importance of limiting the length of the asylum procedure and the period until placement in society. In recent years, the length of time spent in reception centres has increased sharply due to backlogs at the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) and the shortage on local authority housing markets. This is a complex problem for which there are no simple solutions. To limit the negative impact on subsequent integration of the increasing length of time spent in reception, maximum efforts should be made during the reception period to foster participation in integration programmes by offering professional language lessons and wide participation opportunities within and outside the reception centres. By also aiming to create more smaller-scale reception facilities close to the surrounding community, residents of reception centres would be enabled to feel less isolated and to make contact with Dutch society. This would also make it possible for local authorities to begin the civic integration process under the new system whilst asylum-seekers are still in reception centres.

Placement policy

The Dutch placement policy leads to dispersal of permit-holders across the country. The idea behind the policy is that this helps prevent segregation and that the pros and cons of the integration of permit-holders are distributed among municipalities in proportion to the size of the local population. As this study shows, however, dispersal leads to unequal outcomes on the labour market. Following the example of the more targeted placement policy in other countries, a ‘Screening and matching’ programme has been developed in the Netherlands, aimed at creating a better match between the education and work experience of permit-holders and the region in which they are placed. An evaluation of the pilot ‘Promising links’ (‘Kansrijke koppeling’) reveals that there are still many problems in the implementation of this project (Sax et al. 2019). Recommendations for placement in a particular region based on the knowledge and experience of the permit-holders concerned do not always result in them actually being placed in that region. The officials concerned also often lack the necessary labour market information to make adequate recommendations for particular regions. It therefore makes sense to look at ways of improving the implementation of the policy. A review of working practices and experiences in other countries could also help develop the insight that is needed to ensure that the placement policy achieves a better match between the characteristics of the permit-holder and those of the region. Algorithms and big data could potentially be useful here (Gerritsen et al. 2018; CPB & SCP 2020). In exploring the possibilities for modifying the placement policy, it is important to take into account the degree of support in the population. At present, permit-holders are dispersed proportionately across the country based on the number of people in the local population; deviating from that rule could lead to higher numbers of permit-holders in certain regions and differences in the quality and composition of groups of permit-holders (e.g. regional differences in advantaged and disadvantaged permit-holders).

More permit-holders with a Dutch qualification

Having a Dutch qualification is very important for a person’s position on the labour market. Permit-holders face several obstacles in gaining entry to Dutch education establishments. These relate among other things to the recognition of foreign qualifications and the language requirements imposed by education institutions, and the possibilities that local authorities offer for studying whilst receiving benefits. The policy in relation to education and permit-holders is fragmented. Some education institutions, for example, offer permit-holders an ‘orientation year’, in which language lessons and following a course of education are combined, but this is not a general policy. The policy on studying whilst receiving benefits also varies from one local authority to another. One positive aspect of the new civic integration system is the separate education route to facilitate access to the Dutch education system.

Health policy

Health plays a role in civic integration. Attention for the health of permit-holders could accordingly contribute to their successful completion of the civic integration process.

A short asylum procedure and limited period spent in reception facilities, among other things by limiting the number of relocations, rapid access to housing and family reunification, reduce the health risks. Avoidable health problems could also be prevented as far as possible by early recognition, targeted prevention and facilitating good access to care. Specific attention for health during the civic integration process could avoid permit-holders failing to pass the integration exam (on time) or integrating at a level that is below their capabilities due to health problems. Partly due to the lack of a clear role for the local authority in the current integration system, it is unclear who would be the appropriate party to signal health problems. Given the clear relationship between physical health and civic integration, permit-holders with chronic illnesses/conditions and impairments in daily functioning warrant specific policy attention, since they are at greater risk of failing the civic integration exam. Permit-holders with mental health issues who are receiving professional help are also an important group for attention. The wide deployment and funding of professional interpreters is one way of preventing language problems impeding access to and delivery of care for permit-holders. As we have pointed out already, the new civic integration legislation offers the opportunity for permit-holders with physical and/or mental health problems to achieve the best possible progress through the civic integration programme by offering them tailor-made support.

Implementation: the importance of respectful treatment and perceived fairness

A key finding of this study relates to the significance of the experiences of permit-holders with the implementation of the policy. It is precisely in the first phase of their lives in the Netherlands that issues such as being treated respectfully, fairness and feeling welcome are important for the 'softer' aspects of integration. These are in turn ultimately important for the structural integration which is the principal focus of the policy. In general, Syrian permit-holders are found to be satisfied with how the relevant institutions operate and treat them, though this does not apply for everyone: we know from qualitative research that prejudices and lack of understanding occur in the interaction between policy and permit-holder (Damen et al. 2019; Van Liempt & Staring 2020; Sterckx & Fessehazion 2018). In essence, it is about the quality of the service, where the aim should as far as possible be to avoid misunderstandings due to communication problems and lack of knowledge about the (cultural) background of the permit-holder. The importance of policy lies not only in its design and the choice of goals, but also in how it is implemented, how the subjects of the policy are treated by policy staff and the quality of those staff.

Public support for policy: interaction between position of permit-holder and host community

The findings of our study endorse the importance of policy for the position of permit-holders in a number of areas. As this report is based on the perspective of the permit-holder, we devoted little attention to the importance of public support for such policy. However, this in no way suggests that public support is not important, since it may be

assumed that it influences both the design and continuity of policy, as well as its operation. It is not easy to provide a clear picture of the public support, let alone its influence. While there is wide support within the Dutch population for the acceptance of ‘genuine’ refugees, at the same time there are concerns about the reception and integration of permit-holders (Den Ridder et al. 2016; Mensink & Miltenburg 2018). There is a large middle group in Dutch society who combine such concerns with a generous attitude towards admission and integration. When large numbers of refugees came to the Netherlands in around 2015, it became clear that some Dutch citizens felt it was wrong that there were lots of facilities for refugees and were concerned about pressures on the housing market, the care system and other public services. Two out of five Dutch citizens felt in 2016 that at least half of all refugees were abusing the benefits system (Den Ridder et al. 2016). In part of the Dutch population, support for policy specially for permit-holders is limited. They feel abandoned, that they are not getting what they were promised, and sometimes refer explicitly to migrant groups, who they believe receive more help (Den Ridder et al. 2019). The increased diversity by origin, partly resulting from the influx of refugees, can put social cohesion under strain at local level (WRR 2020). Using policy to help different groups live alongside each other could potentially increase the mutual understanding and therefore possibly also the support for specific policy for permit-holders.

Policy for permit-holders (or more broadly, migrants) thus rapidly becomes an object of scrutiny, and policy which leads to an advantage for permit-holders, in particular, is likely to be criticised. Seen in this light, the political consensus about the new civic integration policy can be described as remarkably strong: no fewer than 145 of the 150 members of the House of Representatives voted in favour of it (only the Denk and Forum for Democracy parties voted against). Civil-society organisations such as the Dutch Council for Refugees also support the new civic integration system. There is a broadly shared belief that the present system is not working and needs to be replaced by a new, more effective system. The election programmes of the different parties also reveal strong support for the civic integration policy. Many parties emphatically highlight the importance of increasing the labour market participation of permit-holders (Van Noije et al. 2021). The political support for encouraging the participation of newcomers also extends to the period spent in reception facilities, where the opportunities for learning the language and doing voluntary work have already been expanded in recent years. The differences between the parties are wider when it comes to the asylum policy to be pursued. The new civic integration system envisages that local authorities will begin straight away with the broad-based intake whilst permit-holders are in reception facilities. To facilitate this, the participation policy is being brought forward as much as possible. Until a few years ago, policy proposals to expand the possibilities for participation by residents of reception facilities were the subject of fierce debate. It was argued that such policy would set the expectations of asylum-seekers too high and exert a pull-effect, drawing in additional migrants. These arguments have faded into the background, enabling the civic integration policy to enter calmer political waters in recent years, with practical arguments gaining the upper hand. This would seem to be

helpful for the operation of the new policy, without eliminating all the questions surrounding budgets and implementation or implying that there has been a strong increase in public support for policy directly targeting permit-holders.

The coronavirus crisis

What the longer-term consequences of the coronavirus pandemic will be is currently anyone's guess. What we do know is that Syrian permit-holders are in a vulnerable position in several areas, and it is therefore likely that they are also being hit harder by the crisis (cf. Dagevos & Miltenburg 2020). Their labour market position is generally fragile: the majority of Syrian permit-holders who are in work are in flexible jobs – the kind of jobs which are generally discontinued in times of economic downturn (see Muns et al. 2020; Adema et al. 2020). The prospect of an increase in the number of permit-holders moving out of work and onto social assistance benefit is a real one, and the chances of them finding new jobs are likely to decline sharply. The pandemic also makes it more difficult for them to learn the Dutch language, for example because language schools are closed, online language lessons are not being offered and there are fewer opportunities to build or maintain social contacts with Dutch-speakers. Syrian permit-holders are also vulnerable because of their poorer mental health, and the risk to their mental health is exacerbated by being forced to stay at home and the uncertainty of their lives in the Netherlands (Pharos 2020). All Dutch citizens are going through a difficult time because of the coronavirus crisis, but this is probably even more applicable for permit-holders who are in danger of falling into isolation precisely at a time when they are taking their first steps towards a new life.

Note

- 1 There are several ways of performing evaluation research, but strictly speaking only experimental research designs (random allocation, an experimental and a control group which differ clearly from each other in their exposure to a given intervention) are suitable for making statements about the effectiveness of policy. In practice, it is very rarely possible to use such designs. The same applies for research on the positions attained by permit-holders in Dutch society.

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