

Plan Einstein: Utrecht's Urban Experiment on Asylum Seeker Reception

Emerging Policy Implications

March 2019

Global Exchange
on Migration & Diversity



Utrecht's Refugee Launchpad, known locally as 'Plan Einstein' is the innovative approach of the municipality of Utrecht and its partners in the field of reception and integration of refugees. In the Overvecht district of the city, asylum seekers and refugees lived together with young local people, while residents from the neighbourhood were invited to take courses together and engage in social activities in a shared social space. With courses in English and entrepreneurship, asylum seekers and local residents work on their professional future, no matter in which country that future lies. This co-living, co-learning reception facility aimed to develop asylum seekers' social networks with neighbours, while providing opportunities for each to develop their skills, to enhance wellbeing and community cohesion in the city.

The Partners

The Utrecht Refugee Launchpad was developed by the Municipality of Utrecht with the Social Impact Factory (NGO), Socius Living (SME), Utrecht Center for International Entrepreneurship at the University of Utrecht, the Dutch Refugee Council (NGO), and the Volksuniversiteit Utrecht.

The Universities of Roehampton (Dr Caroline Oliver) and Oxford (Dr Sarah Spencer, Global Exchange on Migration and Diversity and Research Associates Dr Karin Geuijen and Dr Rianne Dekker) are researching the impacts of the project on the asylum seekers and local residents.

This briefing summarises emerging findings from the evaluation of the project and their policy implications. Full findings are available in October 2019.

The full project ran from November 2016 until October 2018 and the education and social part of the project now continues nearby in Plan Einstein Haydn. In the practical program participants can get help starting a business, gain entrepreneurial skills, get individual coaching and expand their professional network. Asylum seekers thus use the waiting time while awaiting a decision on their application for refugee status, and local residents also take a step further in their future.

Heart of the concept

Fundamental to the aims and success of the initiative have been three principles:

- Recognition that asylum seekers are residents of the city for whom the municipality also has a responsibility – for their welfare and their relations with other residents
- Relationships thrive through encounters on the basis of equality and mutual respect
- Integration is not only for long-term residents, but a process in which asylum seekers are engaged from the outset, however short or long their residence in the city.



Emerging findings and implications

A shared communal physical space is important for meaningful social encounters. It should be developed through co-ownership and collaborative design, extended opening hours and freedom of entry. Pleasant outdoor space is also vital and where encounters frequently occurred with relative ease.

Regular opportunities for casual, habitual encounters matter as well as shared, structured activities. Lightly managed or facilitated, they provide a low threshold point of social contact for both asylum seekers and local people. At Plan Einstein, a language café and music evenings were among the opportunities for this.

Opportunities for reciprocity are essential - to be comfortable receiving, people need to be able to give in return. Enabling asylum seekers to use the skills they brought to the programme creates opportunities for this.

Optimal ratios and group composition of residents and asylum seekers are vital factors. The more different the groups in size and composition the more challenging the relationships. Whether the asylum seekers and young people should be matched in part, and whether co-living young people are from the neighbourhood itself as well as how much engagement is expected, need careful consideration.

What the programme offers needs to be diverse, recognising the varying needs, skills and profiles of the people involved. English and entrepreneurial skills were valued but a more diverse offer of practical skills as well as options for the highly-skilled engage more people and enable breadth of learning and progression. A choice of intensive courses, as well as 'taster' classes, would also maximise the opportunities for learners.

Progression needs to be embedded in the courses and the pathway explicit. This ensures a longer term commitment to learning and possibilities for developing networks.

Participants need to build a *relevant* professional and social network, especially through contact with matched coaches and facilitated social contacts. This helps to restore personal and professional identities and make participants feel valued and respected, as well as opening opportunities for future employment or entrepreneurship, wherever located.

Developing and communicating shared goals among partners, and clarity on decision making in the centre, ensure that differing responsibilities do not lead to differing priorities.

The Research

The research has involved: Face to face surveys of residents at 300 addresses near the centre; an online survey with the young people living at Plan Einstein; monitoring process indicators - e.g. numbers of participants on courses & in social activities); analysis of asylum seeker intake assessment data; evaluations of course activities, interviews with all groups involved and participant observation in centre activities, events and meetings. This briefing reports on findings to June 2018



Plan Einstein is funded by the European Regional Development Fund through the Urban Innovative Actions Initiative