

## **The role of higher education in the process of integration and introduction of refugees in small municipalities in rural areas in Scandinavia**

**Sigrun Sand**

Lecturer and researcher, Institute of Social Science  
Hedmark University College  
Norway

### **Quotation information**

SAND, Sigrun (2008), "The role of higher education in the process of integration and introduction of refugees in small municipalities in rural areas in Scandinavia". *Proceedings of the 4th International Barcelona Conference on Higher Education, Vol. 6. Higher education for intercultural dialogue and multiculturalism*. Barcelona: GUNI. Available at <http://www.guni-rmies.net>.

### **Abstract**

In this paper I will present a project carried out by Kirsti Kuusela, University of Karlstad, Sweden and Sigrun Sand, Hedmark University College, Norway in 2003 – 2006. The project was funded by the Interreg IIIA Sweden-Norway-program and focused on integration and the introduction of refugees in small municipalities in rural areas in Scandinavia. The paper is about how the project was undertaken, and represents an example of cooperation between higher education institutions and surrounding society with a focus upon the after-effects of migration and globalisation. The paper also provides an overview of research concerning how the work is done in a number of municipalities when it comes to the introduction and integration of refugees. The research will contribute to higher qualifications in higher education about the multicultural situation and the relation between majority and language and cultural minorities in small places in rural areas in Scandinavia.

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### **Background**

It is not only in great cities and urban areas in Norway and Sweden that the population is complex and varied with regard to mother-tongue, religion, culture and experiences. Rural areas have also become pluralistic in the sense that people have settled from different parts of the world. Most municipalities have settled refugees because of the authorities' wish to disperse refugees instead of concentrating them in larger groups. The authorities emphasise that the goal of integration is inclusion and participation which is seen as "two sides of the same coin" (Government White Paper No 49 (2003-2004)). Participation relies upon being included, and mainstream society expects refugees to participate in working life, leisure time activities, politics and parent meetings and in more informal arenas, such as going to the movies, using the swimming hall and talking to the neighbour. However, it is a reality that many refugees are neither active participants, nor have been included. To which extent refugees participate or not, is to a certain degree used as a standard for whether they are integrated or not.

The aims of the Interreg- project were

- to identify opportunities and challenges which promoted and/or hindered integration of refugees in small municipalities
- to identify the needs of basic knowledge and qualification for persons who have responsibility for the introduction- and the integration process
- to develop and offer a further education course for these persons
- to have a closer look at concrete work done in a number of municipalities when it comes to the introduction and integration of refugees

### **Selection and research methods**

The participants in the project were persons who in different ways had the main responsibility for working with the introduction and integration of refugees in 7 municipalities in Norway and in 5 municipalities in Sweden. Of these persons, a total of 30, 15 came from Norway and 15 from Sweden, worked together with the two

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researchers from The University of Karlstad, Kirsti Kuusela and Sigrun Sand, Hedmark University College. The persons from the municipalities were informants in the research part of the project, and they also carried out the further education course as a pilot group. Research methods, used in both of the countries, were interviews, discussion groups and questionnaires. The persons were interviewed and they answered a questionnaire about what is done in the municipalities from the moment the refugees arrive and in the period that follows. In addition, the informants carried out project work in their municipality and wrote a report which also was used as data material in the research project.

**The research project**

The full paper and the presentation at the GUNI conference will focus on the research projects carried out both in Norway and Sweden. The presentation will discuss first and foremost the work which is done in the municipalities with regards to refugees who fall under the Introduction Act for Refugees and what is done from the moment they arrive and in the period that follows, how the introduction period is accomplished, what works well and what does not work so well, shed light over challenges and give concrete examples of conditions which promote and/or hinder integration, seen from the view of the informants.

Here I will give a short presentation of some main subjects in the Norwegian part of the research project. It builds on a survey which was conducted in 2005-2006 with 11 persons who in different ways had the main responsibility for working with the introduction and integration of refugees in 7 Norwegian municipalities.

**Work with the refugees' introduction**

The model which is used in the introduction work in the municipalities is called introduction programme, but it is difficult to follow accurately. Even though the same model is supposed to be used in all municipalities, adaptations to local conditions have to be made, which in turn leads to variation in the programme. One important variable here is the refugee adviser's working conditions. In some municipalities there is no post description for the refugee adviser and the post size varies. Nor are there formal

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requirements concerning qualifications. The refugee advisers partly have to "create their own job", and several express that they follow the principle that "they have to find their way as they go along". One said "This field is like a deserted island in the municipality". The refugee advisers have as a rule the main responsibility for the re-settlement, information, contact with kindergartens and school, economy, and act as contact persons in all cases regarding the refugees. The refugee advisers have possess many and varying tasks and are central persons in the municipality's refugee work. In some municipalities it is the refugee adviser who "does everything".

Problems presenting and discussed further will be

- What works well and not so well regarding the cooperation with the introduction of refugees in these municipalities?
- What is most important in the introduction work?
- Ethical dilemmas
- Cooperation in the municipalities and cooperation with the refugees about the introduction
- Cultural meetings majority – minorities
- The integration process – what does it mean?
- Kindergarten and school
- Leisure time
- Work
- Attitudes

**Theoretical concepts and perspectives**

In the discussion of the results I will use theoretical concepts and perspectives like integration, assimilation, segregation, intercultural dialogue, multiculturalism, empowerment, racism and bilingual education

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## **Introduction**

In this paper I describe a project carried out by Kirsti Kuusela, University of Karlstad, Sweden, Sigrun Sand, Hedmark University College, Norway and Mostafa Pourbayat, The regional government in Hedmark in 2003 – 2006. The project was funded by the Interreg IIIA Sweden-Norway-program and focused on the introduction and integration of refugees in small municipalities in rural areas in Scandinavia. The paper is about how the project was undertaken, and represents an example of cooperation between higher education institutions and rural communities with a focus upon the after-effects of migration and globalisation. The paper has two main parts: the first is a brief description of an education course model for multidisciplinary competence in multicultural work that addresses the needs of different groups of professions. The second part provides an overview of research concerning how the work is done in a number of municipalities when it comes to the introduction and integration of refugees. The continuing education course will contribute to the successful introduction and integration of refugees in the municipalities, and the research will contribute to better understanding of the relation between majority and language and cultural minorities in small places in rural areas in Scandinavia.

## **Background**

It is not only in great cities and urban areas in Norway and Sweden that the population is complex and varied with regard to mother-tongue, religion, culture and experiences, rural areas have also become increasingly pluralistic. In the sense that people have settled from different parts of the world. The regions Hedmark, Värmland and Dalarna are considered rural areas with several small dense towns and cities where migration and depopulation are regarded as important challenges. This problematic situation causes rippling effects in relation to economic development and public service. The patterns among immigrants as domestic movers show that they move from small cities to larger ones in central areas. There is a tendency towards the belief that better integration within the local society, equal/equivalent public service and a solid social network can lead to a stabilisation of the settled areas. Because of this it will be

important to be able to develop and pass on a tool that can be used to bring relevant competence to the public service sector outside larger cities.

Most municipalities in this region have settled refugees because of the authorities' wish to disperse refugees instead of concentrating them in larger groups. The authorities emphasise that the goal of integration is *inclusion and participation* which is seen as "two sides of the same coin" (Kommunal- og regionaldepartementet, 2003:79). Participation relies upon being included, and mainstream society expects refugees to participate in working life, leisure time activities, politics and parent meetings and in more informal arenas, such as going to the movies, using the swimming hall and talking to neighbours. However, it is a reality that many refugees are neither active participants, nor have been included. To which extent refugees participate or not, is to a certain degree used as a standard for whether they are integrated or not.

### **About the Interreg-project Expertise in Multiculturalism**

The aims of the Interreg- project were

- to identify opportunities and challenges which promoted and/or hindered integration of refugees in small municipalities
- to identify the needs of basic knowledge and qualification for persons who have responsibility for the introduction- and the integration process
- to develop and offer continuing education for these persons
- to have a closer look at concrete work done in a number of municipalities when it comes to the introduction and integration of refugees

**The project wanted to produce knowledge about emerging multicultural challenges, and develop a tool that will be passed on and recommended to educational- and research institutions. Challenges tied to integration, adaptation and psychosocial situations are considerably weighted. Sharing the results of the project with other institutions and organisations will promote greater competence and equality in multicultural society.**

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The collaboration partners in the project were in addition to the University of Karlstad, Hedmark University College and The regional government in Hedmark, The centre of multicultural knowledge and competence in Elverum, Glomdal Museeum, The immigrational council in Hedmark and selected communes in Hedmark, Värmland og Dalarna.

**The project resulted in an anthology with nine articles on the main topics in the study plan and two articles about research on introduction and integration of refugees in the participating municipalities. The anthology (Sand & Kuusela, 2006) will be used as syllabus in further courses.**

***A brief description of the continuing education course***

***Aims***

The continuing education course is aimed at helping professionals working in a multicultural environment in the public sector to be better prepared to make decisions and take action. Students who complete the course should be able to identify the needs and challenges connected to the integration process by acquiring

- a knowledge of Norwegian and Swedish integration policies in theory and practice in a comparative perspective
- a knowledge of migration and migration processes, culture, cultures meeting and cultural variation
- a knowledge of refugees' health and psycho-sociological situation
- insight into any given refugee group's background and cultural ballast, such as ethnicity, sense of identity, language and religion
- an awareness of how the mass media treat immigrant and refugee matters, and their role in influencing opinion
- the necessary expertise to avail themselves of relevant methods and strategies to counter discriminatory practices, to tackle crises and to speed up the integration of immigrants into local society

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***Contents, structure and organisation of the course***

The course is cross-curricular, combining theoretical knowledge with experience of methods and strategies from practical integration processes at the local level. The theoretical knowledge is from the fields of sociology, psychology, pedagogy, social anthropology and the health and care sector. The course consists of lectures, group discussions, workshops, tutorials and exchanging of experience, project work, and various types of oral and written communication.

15 participants from Norway and 15 from Sweden tested the education concept in the main project. They also carried out a small research study in their own municipalities which focused on challenges and main topics in their own work. The participants gave important feedback for adjusting the course in a better way for future students.

***About the research project***

The research part of project was carried out by the researchers Kirsti Kuusela and Sigrun Sand. The students in the education course had important responsibilities for this kind of work. These persons, a total of 30, were informants. Research methods, used in both of the countries, were interviews, discussion groups and questionnaires. The informants answered a questionnaire about what is done in the municipalities from the moment the refugees arrive and in the period that follows. They wrote a report which also was used as data material in the research project about what works well and what does not work so well, shed light on challenges and give concrete examples of conditions which promote and/or hinder integration, seen from the view of the informants.

***Policy texts concerning introduction and integration in Norway***

In the Government White Paper No. 49 (Kommunal- og regionaldepartementet, 2003) the Norwegian authorities define integration politics as relating to persons who have immigrated to Norway, and it is about the preconditions for being introduced and included in this new society. In the research literature integration is defined as "...participation in common institutions, combined with maintaining a group identity and



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a cultural distinctiveness.” (Eriksen & Sørheim, 2006:79). As we see, integration is to a large extent about participation in society, but without having to give up one’s own culture.

*Act of introduction*

In Norway the Act relating to the reception procedures and Norwegian language training of immigrants came into force the 1<sup>st</sup> of September 2003. This is a legal requirement which defines aims for integration work and gives guidelines relating to how the integration process is to happen. The introduction service will contribute to the integration of the newly arrived refugees. All municipalities which settle refugees are obliged to offer this service and it is obligatory for refugees to participate in the service. The aim is that the refugees will start working faster, learn about Norwegian society and become economically independent.

The introduction programme can last up to two years, and in special cases up to three years. Within three months of settlement all immigrants attend an introduction programme during which individual plans are worked out for each person. An extended programme includes illiterates who need longer time to learn Norwegian. The municipality closely monitors the immigrants' progress. If necessary, immigrants can get guidance and follow-up activities from municipal authorities.

*Who are the refugees in these municipalities?*

In the municipalities there are housed both quota/transfer refugees and refugees from reception centres for asylum seekers, asylum seekers and those reunited with their families. The number of refugees in the municipalities who are part of the Norwegian survey vary between totally 30 to 340. They come from many different countries including Kosovo, Iraq, Somalia, Chechnya, Eritrea, Ethiopia, former Yugoslavia, Palestine, Romania, Liberia, Iran, Vietnam, Bosnia, Serbia, Afghanistan and Lithuania. Those who have arrived last are from Afghanistan, Burma/Myanmar, Burundi, Iran, Congo, Kosovo, Liberia, Somalia and Chechnya. In addition we have those from immigrant backgrounds who are not refugees.

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***Presentation of findings***

I will present some of the findings, mostly from the Norwegian part of the research project, but with some supplements from the Swedish research as well.

***1. Work with the refugees' introduction***

The municipalities can to a certain degree choose which refugees/groups of refugees will be settled in the municipality. One wish can be to locate families instead of singles, because it is considered more difficult to house singles in small municipalities. Another wish is to settle several refugees from the same ethnic backgrounds which the municipality already has. It is suggested that a group of about 100 persons from the same group is an appropriate number. It is seen as positive that the ethnic group is of a certain size, and one does not wish "too many languages and cultures at the same time". *"We place them so that they have contact with people from their own ethnic group; this affects the integration because they help each other. For example illiterates get help from their own ethnic group for kindergartens, offices and forms,"* one of the informants explained.

Some of the refugees have wishes of their own regarding where they would like to live. The greatest municipality in this survey has a political resolution to settle 105 refugees during a three year period. Municipality experience with locating refugees varies, but one of the municipalities has housed refugees for more than 30 years.

Even though the same model is used in all municipalities, adaptations are made, there will have to be made adaptations to the local conditions which in turn will lead to variation in the programme. One important variable here is the refugee adviser's working conditions. In some municipalities there is no post description for the refugee adviser and the post size varies. Nor are there formal requirements concerning qualifications. The refugee advisers partly have to "create their own job," and several express that they follow the principle that "they have to find their way as they go along." The refugee advisers have as a rule the main responsibility for the location, information, contact with kindergartens and school, economy, executive officers and contact persons in all cases regarding the refugees. The refugee advisers have as we see many and varying tasks and are central persons in the municipality's refugee work.

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In some municipalities it is the refugee adviser who "does everything" (Jf. Dahl, Enemo, & Svenkerud, 2006).

One tries to provide language training places and to motivate the refugees for participation in the local community, to "assume responsibility for their own lives". This implies a lot of direct contact with the refugees over a period of time, and it requires a lot of cooperation with other municipality services. Even though one tries to work from a "sector-responsibility-principle", this implies that all municipality sectors and services are to take responsibility for the refugees. The refugee consultants bare a lot of responsibility for succesful integration.

In several municipalities there is inter-authority cooperation regarding training in Norwegian with social sciences as a central part of the introduction programme. One big challenge is: how to come to an understanding that all the municipality services take responsibility for the introduction and integration work of the refugees? "*They are the refugees of the municipality, not the refugees of the refugee office.*" as one puts it.

## *2. What works well and not so well?*

### *The introduction service*

The introduction service seem to be successful to a large extent. Many of the informants are very positive towards the introduction services because it shows refugees are to be activated from day one. It requires the active learning of Norwegian. In addition it helps that the introduction is systemised and made visible. In some of the municipalities the refugees have got one contact person, which functions well, and several are of the opinion that following up the individual refugee functions well, even though some express that they would but some wish there was more time for individual contact. Some of the municipalities only have a small number of refugees, and one of the informants thinks that this makes the situation clear and good. Establishment and settlement of the refugees is also mentioned to be successful, even though not everybody in the community is happy to have a refugee as his/her neighbour.

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*Language Training and Work*

Some aspects of language training do not function well, according to the informants. Many refugees do not pass the *Norwegian Tests for Adult Immigrants 2 and 3*, and the teaching and learning methods need to be improved so that the throughput becomes better. Low throughput may be connected with too few language practice places. Even though one has provided language practice places sometimes, there are problems with the coordination of the language teaching and the practice services the refugees are given. In addition, there may be problems with the following-up and supervision. The next step in the integration process is the job market.

Work is seen as an important entrance to society, and a lot of effort is made at many levels in society to qualify newly arrived immigrants for working life. This is the aim of the entire introduction service through Norwegian training, language practice place and work practice place. In one of the municipalities all refugees in the introduction programme are offered a language practice place two days a week, when they have reached a certain level in Norwegian. It is important that they come into contact with “the real life”, and are not isolated too long in their own services at the adult education centres. Work practice places are provided by the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Organisation, and the municipality’s experience is that employers are willing to take in people as trainees, but they are not very willing to hire the refugees after the ended trainee period. That is the situation both in the private and in the public working market. A central factor, as it can be experienced in these relatively small municipalities is that a “*slow and intolerant working market*” in the municipalities makes integration difficult.

Several of the refugees wish to move to more urban areas. This can be due to the labour market. People stay put in their jobs, and it is difficult for new people to gain entry. There is great scepticism with regard to hiring immigrants and especially those with limited language skills. Many well qualified persons in this group are therefore unemployed.

*Cultural meetings*

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Cultural meetings between the refugees and "the public sectors" happen in a formal context such as at the public health centre, at school and at public offices. In addition, there occur many informal cultural meetings when the refugees and the majority population meet in connection with delivering children to kindergarten, at the shop, in the street or at the library. The meetings are often characterised by mutual prejudice and fear for the unknown, and they happen "on the terms of the majority". The majority's responsibility is first and foremost to show "good manners" and act as "a good neighbour", according to the informants. There is a great demand for networks, contacts with NGOs and friendly families.

Many ethnic Norwegians keep distance and avoid refugees. Fear, uncertainty and lack of meeting places make it difficult for the two groups to get to know each other. Prejudice and stereotypical beliefs about "the other" is problematic. In one of the municipalities the meetings between the refugees and the local population were characterised by a "greater level of conflict" when they got refugees from Somalia. There have been some open conflicts between refugee groups and the majority, and in the municipalities there are groups among the majority who do not want any refugees at all.

In meetings with the refugees, the municipality workers react with uncertainty and frustration about the refugees' "bad level of language". When both parties do not master a common language, it gets difficult to understand and pass on a message. Such situations often demand longer case work time in public offices, and time is a luxury most places in the public system. It is also an opinion among some of the municipality workers that working with refugees is more difficult. The only persons from the majority who know the refugees are very often the refugees' adviser. This is a demanding situation for both parties. The refugees need a lot of support, contact advice, and many have serious psychosocial problems for a long period.

***Discussion***

There are especially four areas which are regularly mentioned in order for refugees and immigrants to be successfully integrated in society. These are majority language skills, the possibility for work, leisure time activities and the attitudes amongst refugees and

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local population. Here I will focus on the language situation, leisure time and integration.

*Norwegian language skills*

One challenge when it comes to language is arrange a good language training programme so that the adult refugees and immigrants learn Norwegian. Another challenge is to give "descendants" language skills and teaching facilities which enables them to fulfil the authority's wish to give this group, which is referred to as the "chance generation", equal opportunities as the majority population in Norway. Several of the informants look at school as "gathering" places in the sense that it is where all children of the local environment meet, and school is seen as a place where integration is successful. However, one of the informants who works in a school herself, is more critical to the teaching the children get. She says: *"Children and youngsters are placed in schools without any Norwegian skills. This leads to failed schooling and bad integration."* This statement describes what many surveys have shown, that students from minority backgrounds do not cope as well in school as their majority language peers, and that there is a great distance, in fact one of the greatest in Europe, between minority language students and majority language students' school achievements. (Engen, Kulbrandstad, & Sand, 1997; Hvistendahl & Roe, 2003; Sand, 1999). In addition, this student group is overrepresented in special education services. This is to a large degree due to the fact that the teaching, linguistically and culturally, is not adapted to these students' qualifications and needs (Engen & Kulbrandstad, 2004; Pihl, 2005).

When it comes to youngsters and adults, refugees over the age of 16 are normally offered Norwegian training at the adult education centres. The problem for a number of youngsters with weak Norwegian skills and little school background is to fit in and receive teaching which is adapted to their needs. A survey shows that minority students in higher secondary school fail more often than their majority language peers (Møller, 2006). This student group struggles with all subjects, not only Norwegian. The results concern both first and second generation immigrants. However, there are great differences between the different ethnic groups. Here we see that it is a great task for

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society to give all children equal chances for participation in further education and working life. Many of the challenges will be the same for all schools who have minority language students, but there will also be special challenges for schools in rural areas that only have a few students from minority backgrounds. One example is the lack of qualified mother tongue teachers and the possibility to get a bilingual education program in school (e.g. Thomas & Collier, 2003). Norwegian authorities express a great wish that "descendants" will succeed in Norwegian society. Therefore, the refugees' children who are settled in the municipalities today should be given true possibilities to succeed in elementary school and further in the educational system.

*Leisure time*

The leisure area can give good opportunities to create a network, give language and cultural learning and insight in how society works. One reason for the refugees not participating in the leisure time programme of the municipality may have to do with the fact that many have a strong family loyalty and wish to spend their leisure time together with family and relatives (Eriksen & Sørheim, 2003). This is also pointed out in my survey: *"They are at home, speak their mother tongue and thrive with their own ethnic group. During the weekend they visit others from the same group."* Another cause of low participation in leisure activities is that many refugees expect or need a more personal invitation to turn up and become a participant than the majority population. The refugees are a group with very different needs, some need more help than others to come into contact with a leisure time programme and become active and included. Also, many of the leisure programmes in Norwegian municipalities are unfamiliar to the refugees, and it is difficult for them to motivate themselves to do totally new things and participate in very different activities than they are used to (Nilsen, Stenberg, Nes, & Luz, 2006).

It is important that there are different meeting places during leisure time, from clubs and activities as sports, music, library and cafés to more formal arenas as working places, school and kindergarten which can give many possibilities to meet other people. Participation in one arena can open up social opportunities for participation in other arenas later on. Without possibilities for personal meetings, beliefs



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about "the other" built on stereotypes of culture and religion are easily formed. Several of the municipalities worked actively creating contact and meeting places.

The situation descriptions of some of the municipalities show that there are factors both in the local community and factors related to the refugees themselves that affect the introduction phase and the integration. Many institutions contribute positively in this process, such as school, kindergarten, after school-programme, adult education, leisure time activities, teams and clubs and not to forget "the villagers". Others conditions which are important in this connection are the refugees' qualifications, health conditions and skills in the new language. A central factor, specially in relatively small municipalities is a "*slow and intolerant working market*" in the municipalities makes integration difficult.

*Integration*

One of the informants expresses him/her self in the follow way about integration:

*The aim for the work which is done in the municipalities is that the refugees will find their place in work and leisure time, learn Norwegian and become self-sufficient. One tries to arrange things so that they will enjoy themselves and manage their family and master their every day life. This requires adaptation from the refugees, and it is important that they preserve their culture and values, can function with their distinctive character are not "deprived" anything.*

In this connection it will be interesting to look at Berry (2006) and his acculturation profiles. Berry uses four acculturation profiles that describe groups of adolescents with distinct ways of handling the acculturation process. The group who exhibited an integration profile reflected a rejection of assimilation and separation. They have strong ethnic identity and also a national identity and they were proficient both in the minority and in the majority language. They had friends from both groups and they were involved in the new society while retaining their ethnic heritage. The second group showed a strong ethnic profile which is characterised with low score on assimilation, national identity and contact with the majority group. They had social contacts primary



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with their ethnic peers. A third group showed a national acculturation profile with assimilation attitudes and low ethnic identity. They show a strong orientation towards the majority society and mostly the national language. The final group showed a diffuse profile with three contradictory attitudes: assimilation, marginalization and separation, which show ambiguity about their place in the society (Berry, 2006 213). “The integration profile” has been an ideal in public documents about acculturation of refugees in Norway for a long period. But in the last years there has been a tendency towards a more assimilating practice both in kindergartens, schools and in the whole society.

As the research shows it will be a challenge for refugees in small communities to maintain their ethnic network, language and identity because of their small numbers. In this situation it will be important that the society as a whole both permit, encourage and takes responsibility for maintenance of the minority language and culture. It will also be a great challenge to be included and involved in the new society because of low proficiency in the majority language due to few possibilities to get work and interact with the majority population. The informants said that the integration process also depends on the refugees themselves, and the acculturation process was different due to ethnic groups. An important question is also to what degree is the model of introduction a good model for inclusion and involvement. Or does it in the contrary contributes to make the refugees more dependent of the public services and keep them too long in the introduction program? That is not the intention of the authorities and either a good situation for the refugees. As we have seen from the research, it is a great challenge in these municipalities to get the whole municipality services and the inhabitants engaged in the process of introduction and integration of the refugees. It is not possible for the refugees adviser to do the job alone.

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