



# Case Study Briefing

Taking advantage of newly-arrived pupils' earlier experiences and knowledge - A Swedish School Reform



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## 1. Overview

### To take advantage of new-arrived pupils' earlier experiences and knowledge - A Swedish School Reform.

During the past year much of the European political debate centered on ways of handling the 'refugee crises. Integration of new arrivals is a huge challenge on national, as well as on regional and local levels. As part of the issue of how the integration will be improved, recently increasing emphasis has been placed on making use of the knowledge and experience of immigrants, including, for example, their language skills, knowledge, and high levels of education. As a result, the Swedish government has presented a reform package for improving the education of foreign-born pupils. The reforms are regulated nationally, but has to be implemented locally.

This study first and foremost deals with the implementation and short-term results of the introduced reform, but the medium-term and long-term effects are also discussed. It should be noted that this is a new reform that is by and large still in the implementation phase, so introduced methods and their results may be evaluated to a limited extent only.

## 2. Key policy implications

### Mapping the knowledge of new-arrived pupils to promote integration

Swedish-born pupils achieve higher average marks in their compulsory schooling than foreign-born pupils. This is also reflected in the proportion of pupils meeting the entrance requirements for upper secondary school. Poor school results achieved by newly-arrived pupils are seen as a problem for society as a whole, but also as a failure of the education system at large. One reason for this is that schools are not fully capable of fulfilling the task of creating opportunities for all children and young people to develop the skills deemed necessary to function well in society. Ultimately, individual pupils have to bear the brunt. Failure at school can affect self-esteem, and failure to complete compulsory education also has an impact on the futures of individuals, since their choices for further education and work are limited.

From the middle of the 2000s, Swedish school authorities, researchers, and practicing teachers and principals have increasingly focused on how one may better start from and take advantage of new-arrived pupils' earlier experiences and knowledge. Ideas about how pupils' knowledge may be mapped and drawn on have been debated. Organising and planning teaching for new arrivals based on their individual circumstances and needs has been noted as a potential success factor in including them more quickly in the Swedish school system and improving their results. The long-term prospect is to increase their opportunities to study further and join the labour force. In this case, the emphasis has been placed on evaluating the knowledge and experience of new-arrived pupils, and on finding a "faster track" that will promote integration and individual opportunities in their new society.

The Swedish school reform that took effect January 1, 2016 compels schools and school staff to map the knowledge of newly-arrived pupils as soon as they are received, and to then take pupils' prior knowledge and experience into account when their further teaching is planned. This may mean, for example, that pupils can quickly continue with the subjects in which they already have a solid foundation, while schools are able to take immediate action when pupils have major shortcomings. In the longer term, this reform is intended to improve pupils' school results and their ability to achieve syllabus outcomes. The long-term goal is that this in turn will increase pupils' opportunities to continue to higher education, to enter the labour market and thus also to integrate into Swedish society.

## 3. Context

Integration of new arrivals is a huge challenge and a key issue in all European countries. From the middle of the 2000s, Swedish school authorities (for example the National Agency for Education), researchers, and practicing teachers and principals have increasingly focused on how one may better start from and take advantage of new-arrived pupils' earlier experiences and knowledge. Previous studies have shown that Swedish-born pupils achieve higher average marks in their compulsory schooling than foreign-born pupils. This is also reflected in the proportion of pupils meeting the entrance requirements for upper secondary school. These studies also show that teachers have often lacked knowledge about pupils' experiences, needs and interests, as well as of their language and knowledge levels. Consequently, teaching has not been adapted to pupils' circumstances. Schools have largely focused on what are perceived to be pupils' shortcomings and have come to conclusions about pupils' knowledge based on their Swedish language skills. Pupils' prior experiences, language skills and subject knowledge have not been regarded as resources.

As a result, the Swedish government has presented a reform package for improving the education of foreign-born pupils. At the same time it is important to note that the reforms may be seen as the result of interplay between politics, research, and the schools themselves. Support and regulations for handling newly-arrived pupils had already been in great demand from teachers and principals before the reform package took effect. The reform can be seen as a social investment in the sense that it in the long term aim to improve new arrivals integration and possibilities to enter their new society.

The reform package includes, for example, the requirement that all schools have to map the knowledge of all new arrivals from January 2016. Schools are expected to use material developed by the Swedish National Agency for Education in the mapping process to ensure equivalence and maintain quality. The mapping results shall then be the basis of planning the pupils' future schooling. The reform are therefore regulated nationally, but has to be implemented locally. Thus it is up to each municipality to reflect on how the organization and the implementation of the reform should take place and if cooperation with civil society may be appropriate and if needed to fulfil the aims of the reform.

## 4. Sources of evidence

The evaluation is mainly based on interviews. Teachers and/or other staff handling new arrivals, as well as principals and heads of reception centres have been interviewed. The interviewees were selected based on their active involvement in implementation of the reform. Interviews were conducted in six different Swedish municipalities. In two of these municipalities, interviews were conducted both at a reception centre and at a school. Our study accordingly comprises a total of six schools and two reception centres and 14 interviews were conducted.

Using interviews is justified: our objective was not only to determine whether the reform is being implemented, but also to gain deeper understanding of the possible obstacles actors perceive as impeding successful implementation. Based on the aims of our evaluation, interviews were also used to pose questions about possible cooperation with civil society – using questionnaires would not have yielded the same understanding. Interviews allowed us to capture participants' language and categorisations through their own descriptions of the implementation process and the problems they encountered.

The study also include a Literature review. In recent years, government institutions, researchers, teachers and principals have increasingly drawn attention to the reception, introduction and education of newly-arrived pupils. A number of different inquiries and studies have unanimously pointed toward the need of clear guidelines and regulations regarding this group of pupils.

## 5. Main findings

The persons interviewed in this study have positive attitudes and a high level of acceptance of the reform. Interviewees provided different examples of the appropriacy of the reform. All municipalities studied intended to implement the reform fully, although only three of the six currently perform both mapping stages with all newly-arrived pupils. Partial implementation was attributed to a lack of skilled staff and the organisation of schools. Interviewees were additionally uncertain as to the extent to which results from the mandatory mapping process are used to plan further subject teaching. Nevertheless, the reform is still in its implementation phase and interviewees were hoping that things may soon look different.

The interviewees more or less unanimously agreed that the reform has the potential to benefit pupils' prospects of integration, in the sense that it could contribute to improving their schooling, thus opening up future opportunities for further education and for joining the labour force. However, we have difficulty with the aid of this material, drawing firm conclusions about the long-term effect.

The reform per se was not seen as the answer to all problems; it was viewed as a good start, but other types of measures need to be taken to promote integration. Interviewees stressed the need for cooperation, as well as the fact that work was needed on several fronts to facilitate integration. Many interviewees emphasised that the issue is not restricted to schools – attention should also be paid to how pupils spend their free time. One important result is that some interviewees gave examples of cooperation with civil society and other authorities in connection with the receipt of newly-arrived pupils. For example; the local employment office and the local Migration Agency and adult migrants had been appointed as language assistants at reception centres and schools. Some municipalities and schools have been relying on retirees to improve the reception of newly-arrived pupils and one school had a homework assistance run by the Red Cross. The reform may also lead to other partnerships between schools and civil society, since interviewees identified a substantial need for such collaboration after mapping had been done – to build bridges and promote integration.

It is at present very difficult to assess the economic costs and cost-effectiveness of the reform in relation to its expected results. This corresponds to the complexity of evaluating these types of reforms in economic terms. This is in part due to the lack of uniformity in Swedish municipalities and schools as regards definitions of expenses in their accounting statements. At the same time it is important to emphasise that interviewees in the main perceived the reform as potentially cost-effective in the long term.

## 6. Impact & Implications

Increased equality is central to expectations about the results of the reform, as emerges from the interviews. The reform is expected to contribute to more uniform reception throughout Sweden and to reduce the risk that pupils face very different circumstances, purely because they are in different municipalities. According to the interviewees, schools and municipalities now enjoy more equal opportunities to conduct mapping, since they no longer need to decide which material to use or need to develop their own.

Since the reform is still by and large in an implementation phase, it is at present difficult to come to any conclusions regarding outcomes related to pupils' prospects of integration. Yet the interviewees felt that the reform potentially could have positive long-term effects, on the condition that it is fully implemented and that the necessary resources and organization are in place. They stressed that the expectations on the reform will only be realized if the reform is implemented to the full and mapping results are used by teachers at all stages to plan their teaching. Simultaneously they also emphasized the importance of civil society partnerships concerning integration, and some interviewees gave examples of such collaborative activities at their schools.

Regarding the economic costs and cost-effectiveness of the reform in relation to its expected results it is at present very difficult to assess. Partly this depends on that the reform is new and the complexity of evaluating these types of reforms in economic terms. This is also in part due to the lack of uniformity in Swedish municipalities and schools as regards definitions of expenses in their accounting statements. At the same time it is important to emphasize that interviewees in the main perceived the reform as potentially cost-effective in the long term.

A follow-up case study would be of interest since the reform still is quite new, and still by and large in an implementation phase. Furthermore, which is not addressed in this study is the students' perspective which would be interesting to study further.

## 7. Further information

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For further information on InnoSI: Innovation in Social Investment: approaches to social investment from the scientific perspective, visit our website at <http://innosi.eu/>

To view the Community Reporting video with a personal experience of the case study please follow the link below

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL1vtHOjD7gN3W-3Yv3gqMNMh1khVJE-r->

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