



Beyond Formal Integration

Policy Pathways for Belonging and Inclusive Integration

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Drawing on life course interviews with young adult migrants in Sweden, conducted between 2021 and 2024, this policy brief places migrants' lived experiences at the center of integration policy. It understands integration as a lived and relational process, shaped through everyday interactions between migrants, institutions and wider society. The study shows that formal integration markers alone do not secure social belonging and recommends practical measures to strengthen migrants' inclusion through recognition, visibility and reciprocal social practices (Qamar, 2024; Dahlstedt et al., 2017). These recommendations align with Sweden's stated integration goals of *tillhörighet* and *delaktighet*, belonging and participation (Government Offices of Sweden, 2024).

Conceptual Framework

Formal integration indicators, such as employment, language proficiency and legal status, are important, but do not show structural, relational, and societal conditions that enable or constrain migrants' participation, recognition, and sense of belonging. This brief therefore understands integration as a lived and relational process, shaped through everyday encounters between migrants, institutions and local communities (Qamar, 2024; Qamar, 2026).

The analysis focuses on three interconnected levels: 1) the experiential level, which concerns migrants' lived experiences of inclusion, exclusion and belonging, 2) the institutional level, concerning the practices and decisions of schools, municipalities, welfare services and civil society actors, and 3) the societal level, concerning public narratives and structural conditions. Across these levels, integration is jointly produced, rather than achieved by migrants alone. This framework helps explain how formal integration indicators can be complemented by policies that strengthen recognition, visibility and reciprocal participation.

Methodology

This policy brief is based on qualitative research carried out at the School of Social Work at Lund University, between 2021 and 2024. The study draws on repeated in-depth life-course interviews with six young adult migrants. Each informant participated in two to three rounds of interviews, enabling a longitudinal exploration of their migration trajectories and lived experiences. In addition, interviews were conducted with volunteers at church and language cafés, and fieldwork was carried out in community-based settings, including community cafés, language cafés, and church cafés. All participants were aged 18 to 24 years old at the time of the interviews, had secure legal status in Sweden, were proficient in Swedish and were either studying or employed. The study was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

Findings

Formal integration does not secure a sense of belonging

All participants had secure legal status in Sweden, Swedish language proficiency, and were either studying or employed. Yet, these formal markers did not consistently translate into a sense of belonging. The participants described experiences of conditional acceptance, cultural judgment, and being positioned as “others” in everyday social contexts. The young adult migrants supported engagement in Swedish society, while describing some integration expectations as one-sided demands for adaptation. As one participant explained:

If integration means losing my identity to fit theirs, then I hate the word. People should be able to belong without being told their culture is wrong.

A young adult migrant

The quote captures how belonging depends on recognition, mutual engagement and the possibility of being accepted as a member of society without cultural self-erasure. From the participants' perspectives, integration was not experienced as a neutral or mutually negotiated process, but a conditional expectation placed primarily on the young migrants themselves. These accounts describe what participants referred to as “wrong integration”: an understanding of integration in which cultural difference is treated as a problem to be corrected, shaped by assimilationist expectations.

Such narratives reinforce recognition gaps across institutions and everyday life, especially when migrants are treated as primarily responsible for integration while the role of schools, municipalities, civil society and majority communities remains underdeveloped (Abdelhady & Mårtensson, 2025; Qamar, 2024; Strömbäck et al., 2017). These findings illustrate two competing perspectives: a deficit-oriented view of integration emphasizing individual responsibility, and a structural perspective on integration highlighting recognition gaps and systemic inequalities as key barriers to inclusion (Qamar, 2024; Qamar, 2026).

“Being” versus “becoming” - recognition and identity

A central finding of the study is the tension between being recognized as full members of society and being positioned as people whose integration is never considered complete. This tension is here analysed through the distinction between ‘being’ and ‘becoming’. ‘Being’ refers to recognition, social membership and the possibility of participating without erasing one’s background. ‘Becoming’, by contrast, refers to a conditional form of inclusion, in which belonging depends on the extent to which participants are perceived as sufficiently adapted, familiar, and unmarked by difference. This dynamic becomes especially visible in accounts of cultural conformity:

Integration feels like I am expected to forget myself, my roots, my history, and become exactly like them just to fit in. It makes no sense, because even Swedish people would not accept being ‘integrated’ this way when they live in other cultures.

A young adult migrant

The participants articulated this concern through the Arabic terms *aindimaj*, understood as being changed to fit in, and *iinsihar*, interpreted as melting away or disappearing. They connected these meanings to anti-immigrant political discourse centred on conditional acceptance. These expressions can be read in relation to an assimilationist model of integration, often described as the ‘melting pot theory’, in which migrants and minorities are expected to fully adapt to the dominant culture (Berray, 2019).

By contrast, the participants valued the possibility of maintaining diverse identities and participating in spaces where different cultures can coexist, while a shared sense of belonging is actively supported. This aligns with what researchers have described as the ‘salad bowl’ model of integration, which emphasizes cultural coexistence, the preservation of distinctiveness, and collective responsibility for meaningful social inclusion (Berray, 2019; Qamar, 2024).

These accounts show how belonging is weakened when recognition is made conditional on full conformity. Shared civic and institutional participation is valued, yet an integration logic that ties such participation to cultural self-erasure is experienced as exclusionary. From this perspective, top-down integration strategies risk overlooking migrants’ perspectives and lived experiences, shaped by continuous negotiation, identity preservation, and the need for recognition (Dahlstedt et al., 2017; Qamar, 2024).

Barriers to belonging

Another recurrent finding in the study is that young adult migrants encounter barriers to belonging across schools, public narratives and segregated social networks. In schools, everyday interactions often signalled implicit boundaries around competence, recognition and what it means to be seen as “naturally”

Swedish. For example, teachers sometimes underestimated migrant students' abilities, while Swedish classmates expressed surprise at their academic performance.

The participants also frequently reported feeling excluded from close social circles composed of majority Swedes. In addition, visible cultural or religious practices, such as wearing the hijab or abstaining from pork or alcohol, were often perceived by their Swedish peers as outdated or extreme religious practices.

Further, the participants noted that media and political narratives reinforced these boundaries by portraying migrants as culturally deficient, distant or fundamentally different (Ekström et al., 2025; Qamar, 2024; Strömbäck et al., 2017). From the perspective of the young adult migrants, these value judgements contributed to indirect forms of social distancing by framing certain cultural expressions as less legitimate within Swedish social spaces. The participants contrasted this political climate with earlier periods marked by strong civil society support and a welcoming reception (Qamar, 2024; Abdelhady & Mårtensson, 2025; Korver-Glenn et al., 2025).

Residential segregation further limited opportunities for everyday interaction with the majority population. Participants' social networks were largely concentrated among other migrants, reducing opportunities for cross-community ties, mutual understanding, and trust. These findings show that belonging is shaped by institutional practices, public narratives and everyday social contact.

Community actors and spaces that support belonging

The interviews and field visits show that integration was understood as a collective process, supported by institutions, municipalities, and community-based actors. Language cafés, church cafés, libraries and sports-based community spaces functioned as low-threshold settings where social contact could develop gradually through repeated encounters. One participant described this as follows:

I went to language cafés in the church and the city library to learn and practice the language. Later, at a language café run by a sports club, I met other young volunteers. I joined the club and became part of a social circle with both Swedish and migrant players.

Young adult migrant, Sweden

Field visits to a church café, a civil society community café and a language café organized by a sports association, suggest that such spaces can support language practice, informal learning, confidence and everyday interaction. These cafés are important because they provide services while also functioning as relational infrastructure. As such, they create opportunities for recognition, practical support and social ties that are difficult to build through formal institutions alone.

At the same time, their integrative potential depends on who participates. Some of these initiatives remained one-directional, involving migrants and volunteers but limited engagement from the wider majority population. As one language café volunteer noted:

We rarely meet Swedish families. Social integration cannot work only from one side.

Volunteer, Language Café, Sweden

When broader local participation is limited, these spaces may offer important support while remaining socially bounded. This restricts opportunities for bridging ties, mutual understanding and trust across groups. The findings therefore point to the need for community-based initiatives that are not only welcoming to migrants, but also actively involve long-term residents, local associations and municipal actors.

These findings are in line with findings from other studies illustrating the importance of social ties with the wider majority population. An example is the community support program in Sjöbo, demonstrating the potential of a more reciprocal model. Through the program, newly arrived refugees meet regularly with local volunteers and participate in shared activities, including *fika*. These structured and reciprocal interactions can deepen engagement between newcomers and the wider local community, while supporting social inclusion across multiple dimensions of integration. The approach may

strengthen language development, expand social networks and provide valuable insights into majority cultural norms and everyday practices. According to Pihl (2025), Sjöbo's community support program has made an important contribution to refugee inclusion.

Conclusions and recommendations

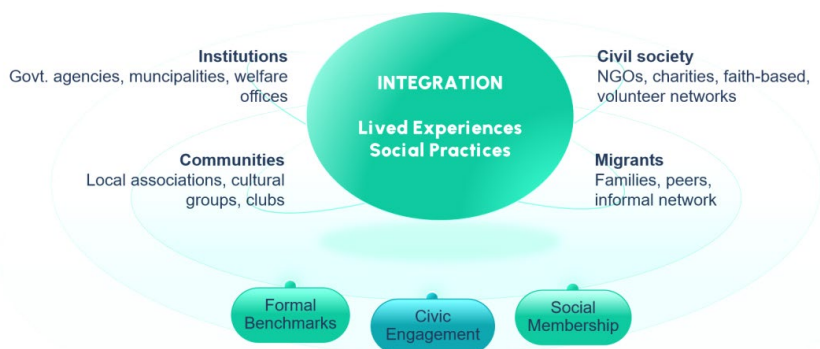
This policy brief shows that formal indicators, such as legal status, language proficiency, education and employment, are important foundations for integration, but they provide an incomplete understanding of integration when used as main measures of inclusion. The young adult migrants in this study had met these formal criteria, yet their accounts point to a persistent gap between formal inclusion and lived belonging.

The findings show that integration is better understood as a lived and relational process, shaped through migrants' experiences, institutional practices, and broader societal conditions. Belonging is strengthened when migrants are recognised as active members of society, able to participate in shared civic and institutional life without being expected to erase their identities or cultural backgrounds.

A key conclusion is that integration policy needs to shift from one-sided expectations of migrant adaptation toward a reciprocal, multi-actor approach. Schools, municipalities, civil society organisations, community spaces and majority residents all have roles in creating conditions for recognition, visibility and everyday participation. Centering migrants' lived experiences can help close the gap between formal rights and social membership, and support long-term social cohesion.

Against this background, integration should be understood as a lived and socially constructed process that extends beyond policy benchmarks, is shaped by dynamic interactions among migrants, local communities and institutions, and unfolds over time and across multiple levels (figure 1).

Figure 1. Policy Approaches to Integration Actors and Processes



Building on these insights, the following recommendations are proposed for policymakers and practitioners at national, municipal, and civil society levels. The aim is to complement formal integration measures with policies that strengthen lived belonging, reciprocal participation and local social membership.

1. Adopt integration measures that go beyond formal markers

Integration monitoring should retain formal indicators such as legal status, language proficiency, education and employment, while complementing them with social membership, recognition and everyday participation. These indicators need to be informed by migrants' experiential perspectives and bottom-up evidence. For example, integration reports produced by municipalities and national agencies could increasingly include migrants' experiences of belonging, access to mixed social networks, participation in local associations, representation in civic forums and experiences of cultural judgement or exclusion.

This would make integration reporting more sensitive to the gap identified in this study, namely that young adult migrants may meet formal integration criteria while still experiencing social exclusion. Such evidence should be gathered through local surveys, qualitative follow-up dialogues and participatory evaluation methods that include migrants as contributors to policy learning.

2. Redesign civic integration as reciprocal civic participation

Civic integration initiatives should continue to communicate on Swedish laws, norms, democratic principles, rights and responsibilities. However, they should be designed as reciprocal civic participation rather than one-way instruction. Programmes that focus only on norms, values and behavioural expectations risk positioning migrants as passive recipients of integration, rather than active members of society.

Municipalities and civil society actors should therefore create structured encounters between newly arrived migrants, long-term residents, local associations and public institutions. This could include facilitated dialogue, mentoring, joint community projects, association-based activities and locally grounded civic learning. The policy aim should be shared responsibility, i.e. that migrants gain access to civic and social arenas, while majority residents and institutions take an active role in creating conditions for inclusion.

3. Strengthen community-based infrastructures

Language cafés, libraries, church cafés, sports clubs, cultural associations and community cafés should be recognised as part of local integration infrastructure. These spaces support language practice, informal learning, confidence, practical guidance and everyday social interaction. Their value lies in repeated encounters, where trust and recognition can develop gradually.

Municipalities should provide stable funding, coordination and outreach support for such initiatives. Funding criteria should encourage participation by both migrants and majority residents, since one-sided participation limits cross-community ties. Community-based initiatives should therefore be supported not only as services for migrants, but as shared local arenas where residents with different backgrounds meet, cooperate and build social trust.

4. Invest in recognition and visibility in local public life

Integration policy should address how migrants are represented, recognised and made visible in everyday public life. The findings show that cultural and religious expressions may be interpreted as signs of failed integration, even when migrants participate in education, employment and Swedish speaking

settings. As a result, migrants' rights to identity, autonomy, and cultural continuity may be overlooked when their cultural expressions are framed as deficiencies in integration.

Schools, municipalities, civil society organisations and local media should therefore develop initiatives that present migrants as students, workers, parents, volunteers, association members, neighbours and civic participants. This can include participatory local media, school-based dialogue, cultural and civic events, advisory forums and public communication that counters stereotypes. Such initiatives can make cultural difference visible as compatible with shared laws, democratic principles and equal rights.

5. Apply a life-course perspective to young adult integration pathways

Integration support should be sensitive to life-course transitions, especially for young adults. Education, entry into work, housing, peer networks, association life and movement from targeted support into mainstream institutions are all moments where belonging can either be strengthened or weakened.

Municipalities, schools, employers, civil society actors and youth organisations should coordinate support around these transitions. This can include mentoring, peer networks, bridging activities, association-based participation and follow-up after formal integration programmes end. The aim is to avoid treating integration as complete once formal criteria are met. Instead, policy should recognise integration as a process that develops over time through institutional access, social participation and recognition.

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The authors are fully responsible for the report ´s contents including its conclusions and policy recommendations.



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