

**POLICY BRIEF**

**Fostering  
an inclusive and  
supportive  
environment for  
young immigrants  
in Iceland**



Nordic Network for  
Adult Learning

# INTRODUCTION

The Education and Training Service Centre (ETSC) in Iceland and the Nordic Network for Adult Learning (NVL) led the project "Voices of young immigrants – inclusion in education, work and society" in collaboration with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour and the Ministry of Education and Children in Iceland. The project was part of the ministries' plan for the presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2023.

# RESPONDING TO

- The immigrant population in Iceland has doubled over the past decade, and this growth is expected to continue.
- The government's new action plan emphasises the importance of enabling immigrants to become part of the Icelandic society and contribute with their skills and experiences.



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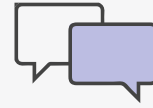
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# AIM



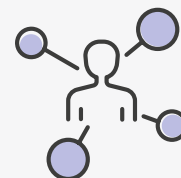
**Amplify  
the voices of  
young immigrants**



**Shed light  
on their present  
challenges**



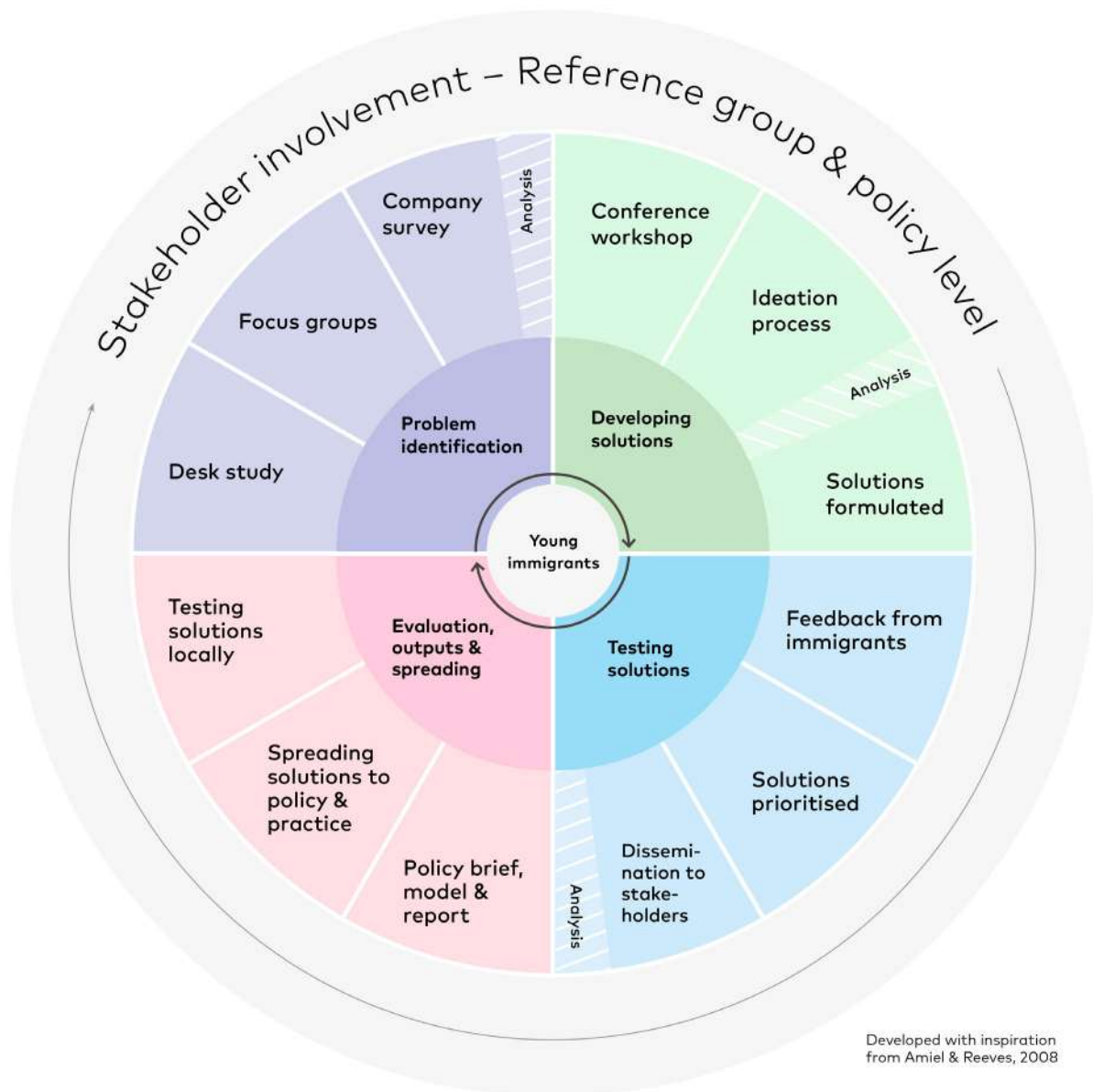
**Propose  
effective solutions**



**Involve  
a wide network of  
stakeholders**

# THE PROCESS

This model outlines the project's process, starting with a focus on the core by placing a specific target group at its centre. In this project, young immigrants (aged 18 to 35) in five regions in Iceland. It applies Design-Based Research (DBR) principles across four phases, showcasing the project activities in each phase.



**Core:** specific target group at the center

**Inner circle:** focus in project phase

**Middle circle:** examples of activities

**Outer circle:** stakeholder involvement – e.g., network group, policy makers, professionals

# KEY CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED BY YOUNG IMMIGRANTS

## EDUCATION

### **Mismatch in Education and Employment:**

Young immigrants struggle to find work aligned with their education, often ending up in unrelated jobs.

### **Need for Flexible Education:**

Many immigrants work and therefore require flexible course hours compatible with their jobs. Lack of information on available courses, e.g. university courses in English, poses a challenge.

### **Language Barriers:**

Limited opportunities to study in English. Some immigrants prioritise learning English before mastering Icelandic. Many take the same level of Icelandic courses repeatedly. Extra support during studies is essential for those who do not speak Icelandic fluently.

### **Not Invited to Group Work:**

Immigrants face discrimination due to foreign names. This was mentioned by both first- and second-generation immigrants. Second-generation immigrants, and those who have moved to Iceland as children or youth, still report being excluded due to foreign names.

## WORK

### **Informal Networks and Reference Letter Challenges:**

Young immigrants rely heavily on informal networks to get employment, facing difficulties in networking and obtaining reference letters locally.

### **Language Barrier Impact:**

Proficiency in Icelandic is viewed as a hindrance in pursuing jobs within their expertise.

### **Variable Support and Training:**

Immigrants encounter inconsistent support from managers and colleagues, impacting workplace integration. Insufficient training by companies hampers immigrants' ability to adapt to new roles effectively.

## SOCIETY

### **Limited Support System:**

Immigrants face a lack of support networks, exacerbating challenges of exclusion.

### **Absence of Assistance in Hard Times:**

Immigrants lack crucial support during difficult periods in their life, e.g. illness, adding to their struggles.

### **Transportation Challenges:**

Access to a car and/or knowledge about transportation infrastructure in Iceland create barriers to mobility, impacting opportunities and participation.

# CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED BY THE REFERENCE (NETWORK) GROUP

## POLICY:

A call for clear and inclusive strategy, political commitment and cross-sectoral involvement.

### Unclear political strategy

There is no clear strategy or policy for immigrant inclusion; no political leadership on the issue.

Immigration issues have no clear home in the political landscape; cross-sectoral responsibility and involvement is needed.

### Unbalanced priorities

Too much focus on work force value of immigrants; not enough on education and meaningful initiatives.

### Inclusion

Immigrant issues should belong in all ministries. Inclusion is a responsibility that concerns all – public and private sector, the civil society as well as the individual citizen.

## THE IMMIGRANT:

A diverse and dynamic group facing challenges of learning, belonging, and identity.

### Heterogeneous group

Immigrants are a diverse group which calls for dynamic and flexible solutions/societal responses.

### Motivation to learn Icelandic

Some immigrants may lack interest in learning Icelandic as English is perceived the easier option and is accepted in society and at work.

### Belonging

Belonging and identity struggles relate to immigrants' feelings of not fitting in or being unwanted.

## INITIATIVES:

A need for better communication and coordination among different actors and programmes.

### Communication

Lack of communication across different actors; solutions only reach a small group of immigrants ignoring their complex and diverse needs.

### Coordination

Lack of coordination among stakeholders developing and implementing different programmes and initiatives.

### One-fits-all models

Tendency to make immigrants fit the programme instead of vice versa; problematic in light of the diverse and dynamic immigrant group.

## BLIND SPOTS:

A challenge to overcome our biases, broaden our perspectives and recognise the value of immigrants.

### Self-centred mindset

One-sided focus on Icelandic point of view; forget to ask and involve immigrants in decision-making.

### Language focus

Strong focus on Icelandic language as the key to inclusion, overlooking other important aspects of creating inclusion.

### Been there – done that

Attitude of "we know it all" and "we have heard it all before"; closed mindsets to new ideas or perspectives.

### Either a problem or a project

Common perception of immigrants as either a problem or a project; forget that they are also contributors and partners.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

These are the main solutions identified:

## 1. Establishing communication platforms and networking opportunities:



- Implement host families and buddy systems for newcomers.
- Employ activity coordinators to visit immigrants' homes.
- Organise pop-up events for informal chats and information sharing.
- Set up local centres or utilise public spaces to create networks and offer assistance.

## 2. Enhancing Access to Information:



- Introduce mentor systems and formalise the roles of immigrant information guides.
- Emphasise consistent and relevant information dissemination on basic procedures.
- Create a unified circle of officials to share consistent information across services.
- Consolidate public offices in one location for streamlined services.
- Formalise access to information on pathways towards work and education.
- Ensure online services are easily navigable for all.

## 3. Improving Education:



- Offer flexible learning methods, including online or pre-recorded courses to watch as well as flexible schedules that accommodate work hours.
- Provide compulsory language learning for free through language cafés and integration programmes.
- Facilitate buddy systems between newcomers and native Icelanders focused on language learning.
- Create opportunities for strengthening English language skills.
- Establish a predictable and continuous offer of educational opportunities.
- Improve the availability of information and supply of courses, particularly in English.

## 4. Work-based Learning Opportunities:



- Integrate job and language training at the workplace.
- Offer mentor assistance on-site.
- Provide comprehensive employee onboarding training.
- Encourage entrepreneurship and increase the availability of grants and support.
- Re-evaluate the potential of social workers/ professionals to provide job references.

## 5. Recognition of formal, non-formal and informal learning:



- Streamline the recognition of qualifications with a more accessible procedure.
- Simplify the validation of prior learning process.
- Emphasize recognition of diverse skills by making them visible.
- Reduce bias in hiring processes, for example by implementing a blind resume.

## 6. Immigrant Involvement in Policy Making:



- Establish advisory boards with immigrant representatives.
- Formally engage immigrants in policy-making processes at both local and governmental levels.
- Utilise available resources like lifelong learning advisors and ambassadors to initiate conversations.
- Actively involve immigrants in service planning, especially when developing new solutions in local government.
- Include perspectives from educators, advisors and coordinators who interact daily with immigrants.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The recommendations outlined in this policy brief respond to challenges in education, work and societal integration, urging policymakers to take action on the proposed solutions in order to create an inclusive and supportive environment for young immigrants in Iceland.

There is a call for a clear and inclusive strategy with goals, actions and outcomes, backed by political commitment and cross-sectoral involvement. It is necessary to actively respond to the identified challenges and needs with the focus on supporting the diverse talents and perspectives of young immigrants, strengthen our workforce and advance societal integration.

The Sustainable Model for Change, collaboration with diverse stakeholders and crucial support from policymakers have provided a strong foundation for recommended actions. For that to actualise, we need all stakeholders on board.

## THE WAY FORWARD

The solutions identified have been spread to various national and Nordic stakeholders, including 14 regional lifelong learning centres in Iceland. Dialogue has begun about testing specific solutions locally in partnership with the centres to be developed according to needs and in partnership with local immigrants. The way forward calls for wide cooperation between service providers and support from policy level.

The working model in this project (Design Based Research) can easily be used in other contexts and applied to other themes and target groups.

The model is introduced in the Sustainable Model for Change which is another output of this project.

This project was designed for the Icelandic Nordic Council of Ministers Presidency in 2023, with support from the sectors of education and working life within the Nordic Council of Ministers.