

CASE STUDY

REPORT

Integrated
development in action!

PROJECT

U-RLP Utrecht Refugee
Launch Pad (Closed)

📍 Utrecht, The
Netherlands

TOPIC

Integration of migrants
and refugees

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Utrecht - U-RLP

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About U-RLP

Utrecht Plan Einstein is a set of accompanying measures alongside a refugee reception centre. By stressing activation from day one. The project provides training in English, entrepreneurship and business incubation for refugees who are in class alongside people. Where possible young people are also housed adjacent to refugees (in Overvecht this was in a separate unit, in Haydn it was not possible). A wide range of indoor and outdoor social activities are animated with the young tenants and with people from the local community. The project illustrates a place-based approach. It is multi-stakeholder and multi-level and it is cross-sectoral. It also had a comprehensive evaluation, and has mainstreamed its policy approach in the city and in the Netherlands.



Socio-cultural activities of Plan Einstein (copyright city of Utrecht)

Plan Einstein in Utrecht was chosen as a case study because it exemplifies an integrated approach to a difficult policy area - that of integrating migrants and refugees at the city level. The UIA project illustrates a place-based approach with an emphasis on building community cohesion within a neighbourhood where a refugee reception centre is based. It combines different policy fields operating at the city and national levels, and in particular, tries to reconcile the needs of the city to integrate new arrivals with the way that the national reception centre policy operated. A key priority of Plan Einstein is labour market activation from the first day of a person's arrival at a reception centre, improving both community integration and individual prospects.

To achieve this focus on activation from day one it was driven by a specialised three-way partnership that includes

public, university, and civic society players. Plan Einstein has also succeeded in mainstreaming the key idea of activation from day one into national refugee policy, as well as surviving as a project in its own right. Careful attention was paid to thorough evaluation using advanced and sensitive techniques. The project has been sustained beyond its final UIA funding date and key changes have taken place in national policy towards refugees to promote activation.

Context

The European refugee crisis of 2016 made possible new thinking about refugee integration. City officials argued that the existing model of reception centres isolated from local communities was not working to help new arrivals to integrate into society. This failure was creating long-term problems for city neighbourhoods where resentment was building up, integration was slow and the well-being of refugees held in limbo was affected.

Refugee reception in the Netherlands is controlled by the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA). There appeared to be a tension between the policy aim of integrating new arrivals and the policies of reception. The city believed that effective integration requires the minimisation of the limbo period experienced by most refugees. The reality experienced by refugees is very different. A typical refugee in the Netherlands moves five times during this limbo period and can wait more than a year to be accepted or refused asylum. In this waiting period, the well-being of the person declines and their ability to reenter the labour market suffers in turn.

Description

The project was co-designed by Jan Braat and Niene Oepkes at the City of Utrecht, who were soon joined by Hein Roelfsema from the Entrepreneurship department of the University. This group wanted to completely change the way that refugees were received into Dutch society which meant aspiring to “change the whole national system”. The national policy operated by COA was to locate most reception centres in fenced-off sites outside of cities, such as in former military camps. During the limbo period, in which refugees wait to be approved for asylum, or refused, a typical refugee would move five times. The Utrecht vision was to put the reception centre at the heart of a city community, offering a more stable space in which contact with the host community would be encouraged to speed up integration and build relations with the community.

To achieve this co-learning and tailored support would be provided. Three aspects would be focused on:

- Social connections and good local relations
- Improved futureproof skills and labour market activation
- Better wellbeing

The first location was a pair of former office buildings in Overvecht. This was to be a temporary facility as the deputy mayor had promised Overvecht residents opposed to the centre that it would only be in use for two years. Keeping this promise meant that the centre had to move to a second location, “Haydn”, in another neighbourhood when the two years of the original lease ended in November 2018. The asylum reception centre in Overvecht was located on Einsteindreef. As a result, the project became known as Plan Einstein instead of its official UIA title of Utrecht refugee launch pad or URLP. It kept this new name in the new location becoming Plan Einstein Haydn.

One of the two former office buildings was developed by COA as the refugee reception centre. Over its short life, it took in 558 refugees. The second building was converted by Socius housing company for the project using about 15% of the budget of 2.8m Euro. It created a residential space for local young people in 38 rooms as well as classrooms and an incubator space. The courtyard was also improved so that outdoor activities and events could take place. The local young tenants had their rent discounted by ten per cent in exchange for a commitment to be involved in activities in the project.

Plan Einstein, which had been approved at the height of the Syrian refugee crisis in mid-2016, faced other barriers in getting underway. One challenge was that the flow of refugees was uneven with slow arrivals of about 50 mostly single people in the first six months up to mid-2017. This was partly a result of agreements between the EU and Turkey. The slow period was followed by an influx in August 2017 which included a much higher proportion of families. Overall instead of catering for emergency arrivals, more than half of refugees coming through the two centres had already obtained or expected to obtain a permit.

Integration activities were to be pursued, such as 8-week training courses in English that could be followed by local people alongside the new arrivals. Other courses in entrepreneurship and in business incubation were also

offered. A target of 20% of course members would be local residents. This turned out to be one of the main ways that refugees were able to interact with people from the local community. This aspect was valued highly by both refugees and the local residents who participated^[1].

Animation of the spaces was important and in the first 2 years of the project 65 one-off social activities took place.^[2] There were also eleven repeating events such as eating together, chilling in the incubator space and Dutch language tutoring. About half of these activities involved a mix of the youth tenants and refugees, while a third involved people from the neighbourhood as well as tenants and refugees. Most of them were led by partner organisations or by the youth tenants.

Language acquisition is a particular problem facing refugees from nearly all countries of origin. The COA requires refugees to learn Dutch but also imposes a repayment requirement if the standard is not reached. For refugees who were less sure of being able to stay in the Netherlands, learning Dutch was not their first priority. Why go to the trouble of learning a new language if you might end up in another country? The project addressed this issue by offering courses in English. Not only is it an international lingua franca but there was the hope that there would be some demand from local people.



Courses provided within Plan Einstein (copyright city of Utrecht)

^[1] Source: Final evaluation report

^[2] Source: evaluation report.

Nature of integration

Utrecht took a place-based approach because of the commitment to make the reception centre work both for the refugee arrivals and for the Overvecht community in which the reception centre was to be based. At its heart was the notion of creating a vibrant centre for the community which would foster community cohesion and speed up refugee integration. This participation in courses and events enabled local people to see the tangible benefits of having the reception centre in their midst.

The project achieved its targets of involving local people in courses and there were some high levels of participation in events - with over 600 people attending one open day in 2017. However, there were constraints on keeping the incubation centre open to the public as Socius felt that they had a duty to ensure the safety of their residents and so the main door was locked except when specific activities were on. The centre was vibrant at

times, but mainly when activities were underway.

The partnership was multi level. At national level it involved the Dutch Council for Refugees. At city level the Utrecht University's Centre for Entrepreneurship, which would deliver entrepreneurship courses, the VolksUniversiteit which also provided language courses, and NGOs such as Socius - a local housing company with radical roots, the Social Impact Factory and Welkom in Utrecht (a new organisation formed in 2016). At least eight other civil society partners were involved in activities. The COA decided to support the project but chose not to become a partner.

There were several cross sectoral policies that the project succeeded in bringing together. The first was to attempt to reconcile the national reception centre policy run by COA with local need to integrate migrants as fast as possible. Utrecht therefore provides an example of making labour market integration a priority, although in practice refugees were still moved out of the Overvecht and Haydn reception centres at short notice.

Normally, a refugee cannot work in the first six months after arriving in the Netherlands. Plan Einstein managed to find ways of bringing residents of the reception centre closer to the labour market from their first day after arriving, such as through courses mentioned above. Once inducted there were internships available in local businesses for those with adequate language and other skills.

A key aspect of the skills training was the idea that they should be future proof. This is easier in theory than in practice but the evaluation suggests that refugees valued the skills and opportunities that they had engaged with.

Takeaways

- Activation from day one is a key principle to maintain links to the labour market, maintain well-being and help refugees to plan for their future
- Building concrete links with the local community can provide two-way benefits and reduce animosity of the host community towards reception centres
- Animation plays a strong role in developing bridging social capital (between refugees and the host community) - for example using outdoor events involving cooking/barbecuing as joint activities. Animation needs to be organised by paid staff who can mobilise residents.
- Links with local people are highly valued by refugees and can build community cohesion
- The design of the space is crucial for promoting a positive atmosphere. Ideally, common spaces should be at ground level with separate entrances from living accommodation. Security of all spaces needs to be considered as a priority.

Further reading and selected key resources

- [Final Evaluation report](#)

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