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STATE OF IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION

State of Immigrant Integration – **Nordic countries**

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State of Immigrant Integration: **NORDIC COUNTRIES**

The Nordic countries have become key destinations for migrants from across Europe and beyond, with foreign-born populations nearly doubling over the past two decades. If effectively integrated, migrants in the Nordic countries have the potential to help meet pressing labour shortages and address growing demographic challenges. Yet, integration outcomes remain uneven, with marked differences between EU and non-EU migrants, women and men, and across generations.

This report provides a comprehensive overview of immigrant integration in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. It examines integration across the labour market, education, language learning, social outcomes and civic participation, with particular attention to specific groups such as humanitarian migrants and children of immigrants. The analysis highlights both the strengths of the Nordic model – high employment, strong participation in education and training, and inclusive welfare institutions – and the challenges that remain in ensuring equal opportunities and long-term social cohesion.

As the fifth in a new series, this report – *State of Immigrant Integration: Nordic Countries* – highlights the main characteristics of the immigrant populations and the primary integration issues in the Nordic countries (see **Box 1**). Comparative analysis with other major European OECD migrant destinations provides a benchmark for identifying barriers and enablers to integration in the Nordic Countries.[1] The OECD Secretariat would like to thank the Nordic Council of Ministers for supporting this report.

This report is based on the joint OECD-EU indicators of immigrant integration report (see OECD/European Commission (2023[1])) and other comparative information by the OECD. Additional analyses were conducted using the Nordic Statistics database and cross-national surveys such as the EU Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS), the EU Statistics of Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), the European Social Survey (ESS) and the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). These surveys draw on large, nationally representative samples and collect detailed information for constructing integration outcomes. Furthermore, they use standardised data collection methods, which facilitate the production of comparable measures across countries. However, limitations of these surveys include a weak statistical representativeness of certain migrant groups – such as humanitarian migrants. Despite these drawbacks, household surveys are a valuable source for cross-country analysis on integration. This report recognises that meaningful international comparisons must consider the different contexts and compositions of the migrant populations across countries.

Box 1 **Definition of the immigrant population**

This report defines immigrants as individuals born outside a Nordic country, regardless of their citizenship. People born in a Nordic country are referred to as native-born. This definition recognises that while citizenship can change over time, birthplace does not. Additionally, the conditions for obtaining host country citizenship vary across countries, making international comparisons based on this criterion difficult. This report avoids the term "immigration background" or "immigration history" – which is often employed to refer to both immigrants and their native-born offspring (i.e. native-born children with two immigrant parents) – and analyses the integration outcomes of these two groups separately. Indeed, the challenges faced by persons born abroad, especially those who immigrated as adults, differ from those of their children who were born and raised in the host country.

1. The countries referred to as "major destinations" in this report are Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Switzerland.

Contents

In Brief

The Nordic countries have become an important destination for migrants, whose younger, working-age profiles have the potential to help counter population ageing, boost labour markets, and support welfare systems.

- **Immigration to the Nordics has substantially increased in recent years, rising by nearly 50% in a decade.** In 2023, the region hosted 4.4 million immigrants, reflecting both long-standing free movement within the EU/EEA and more recent family and humanitarian inflows. Free movement continues to dominate in Denmark, Norway, and Iceland, while in Sweden and Finland migration from outside the EU – particularly through family reunification and asylum – plays a much larger role. This diversification has reshaped both the size and composition of migrant populations.
- **Nordic Immigrants are much younger than the native-born population.** Two-thirds of immigrants are of prime working age (25-54), compared with only one-third of the native-born, making them an important demographic buffer against population ageing. This age structure provides significant labour market potential and has the potential to help sustain the region's welfare systems, particularly in Iceland, Norway, and Finland where working-age shares among immigrants exceed 85%.

Immigrants in Nordic countries have diverse skills and education levels, leading to a wide range of integration needs.

- **Immigrants in Nordic countries are highly educated by international standards.** More than one in three hold a tertiary qualification – above the EU average – and recent arrivals are even more likely to be highly educated. At the same time, many non-EU born migrants still arrive with low levels of schooling, particularly in Sweden and Denmark where humanitarian migration has played a large role.
- **Participation in adult education and training is very high.** Migrants in the Nordic countries frequently take part in both formal and non-formal learning, often at rates comparable to or even higher than those of the native-born. This reflects strong traditions of lifelong learning in the region and targeted integration programmes, particularly in Finland and Sweden where adult education is a cornerstone of immigrant integration strategies.
- **Language learning outcomes are strong.** More than half of all migrants take language courses, and one in three who arrive with only basic skills reach fluency after five years. Humanitarian migrants, who face substantial additional challenges, also make remarkable progress, supported by extensive training systems.

Immigrant employment rates in the Nordic countries are high by international standards, though some groups face barriers to work or struggle to find jobs matching their skills.

- **Employment rates among EU migrants are high by international comparison.** In most Nordic countries, migrants born in the EU have employment levels equal to or above those of the native-born, while non-EU migrants still face gaps of 4-13 percentage points (p.p.). Although these disparities remain, overall migrant employment has risen steadily in the past decade, reaching record highs in 2023.
- **Migrant women, particularly those from inside the EU, have some of the highest employment rates in the OECD.** Across Nordic countries, despite high employment rates among native-born women, EU-born women even outperform their native-born peers. However, given the composition of the foreign-born population, gaps persist. Strong childcare provision and comprehensive family and gender policies in the Nordic countries have enabled high labour market participation for mothers, except in Finland where extensive home-care allowances encourage mothers to stay home.

- **By contrast, the employment rates of non-EU born women are lower than those of their native-born and EU-born counterparts.** These disparities partly reflect the very high employment rates of native-born women in the Nordic countries, as well as the large share of non-EU immigrants with low education levels, who struggle to find work in a labour market with limited options for low-skilled workers. While low in domestic comparison, however, these rates exceed the EU total. Alongside lower employment rates, migrant women tend to be overrepresented in elementary occupations and are more often employed under less secure conditions, such as temporary or part-time work.
- **Highly educated migrants struggle to find jobs that match their skills.** Despite strong credential recognition frameworks, many foreign-born – particularly from outside the EU – struggle to find high-skilled jobs that match their qualifications. In Norway and Iceland, the gaps between highly educated native-born and migrants exceed 30 p.p., some of the largest in the OECD. This represents a significant underutilisation of skills and potential economic loss.

Many migrants in the Nordic countries face challenges of poverty, housing and discrimination.

- **Migrants face higher risks of poverty and housing stress.** While overall poverty rates among immigrants are relatively low in international comparison, they consistently exceed those of the native-born. Migrants are also disproportionately affected by in-work poverty and are more likely to live in rental accommodation, exposing them to substandard accommodation and high housing cost burdens. These pressures are especially acute in Denmark and Sweden, where a quarter of migrant households spend more than 40% of their income on rent. However, the share of immigrants living in substandard housing is relatively low.
- **Discrimination remains a barrier despite strong legal protections.** Between 10% and 14% of immigrants in the Nordic countries report experiencing discrimination, broadly in line with the EU average. Experimental studies show that migrants with "foreign-sounding" names face disadvantages in both hiring and housing markets. Recent anti-discrimination strategies across the region – including youth-focused initiatives in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden – aim to address these challenges more proactively.

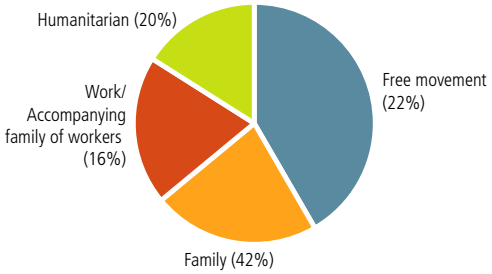
Children of immigrants struggle in school and work. Humanitarian migrants progress with time.

- **Children of immigrants face large educational gaps.** Native-born students with foreign-born parents lag behind the reading ability of their peers with native-born parents by the equivalent of two to three years of schooling, with the largest gaps observed in Finland. They also face greater risks of being neither in employment, education, nor training (NEET), though these differences are smaller than in most OECD countries. Language distance, socio-economic disadvantage and limited intergenerational mobility all contribute to these gaps.
- **Humanitarian migrants have a longer integration path, many bring very low levels of education and take time to find work in a highly skilled labour market.** Many arrive with low levels of education, but substantial shares continue their studies and achieve strong gains in language proficiency. Over time, their labour market outcomes improve considerably, with long-settled refugees in Finland and Sweden achieving employment rates close to those of the native-born. Participation in tailored job and training programmes further supports this convergence.
- **Take-up of nationality is high, but rules are tightening.** More than 60% of long-term immigrants in the Nordic region have acquired citizenship, and in Sweden the figure reaches nearly 90%. Acquisition rates are particularly high among non-EU migrants, reflecting the benefits of secure residence and equal rights. However, recent reforms in Finland, Norway and Sweden have lengthened residence requirements and introduced stricter conditions.

Key facts and figures

EU free movement is the largest category of entry to the Nordic countries

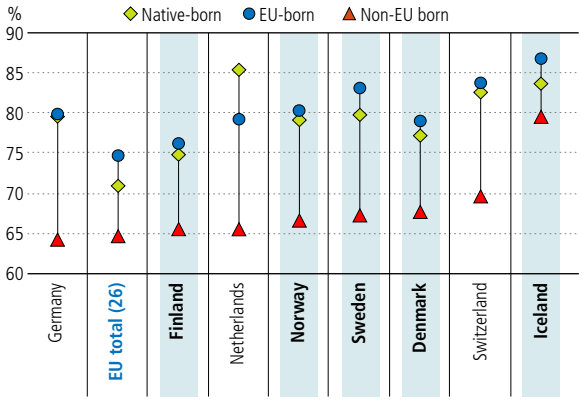
Composition of permanent immigration flows in the Nordic countries, by category of entry, all ages, 2013-2023



EU free movement is the main migration channel to Iceland, Denmark and Norway. In Finland, family migration from third countries represents the largest proportion of permanent inflows. In Sweden, the distribution across categories is relatively balanced.

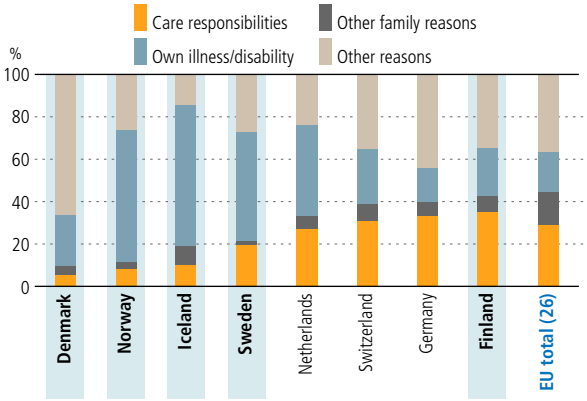
Immigrants' employment rates are high in international comparison

Employment rates, ages 15-64, 2023



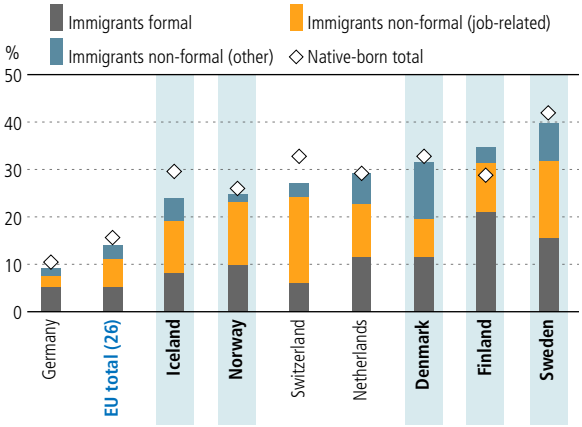
Family and care responsibilities are not a major obstacle to women's employment in most Nordic countries

Share of inactive immigrant women by reason for inactivity, not in formal education, ages 15-64, 2023



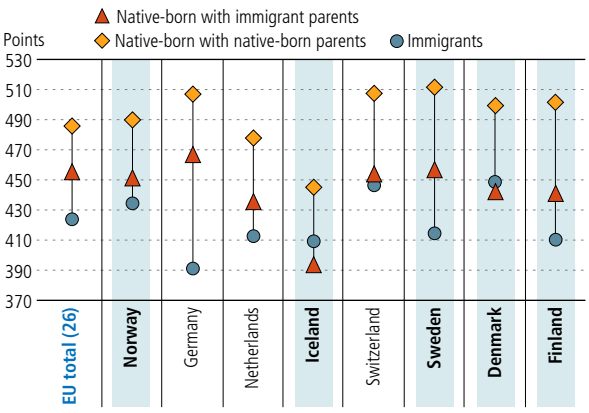
Participation in adult education and training is high in the Nordic countries

Self-reported participation in adult education and training in the four weeks preceding the survey, ages 25-54, 2023



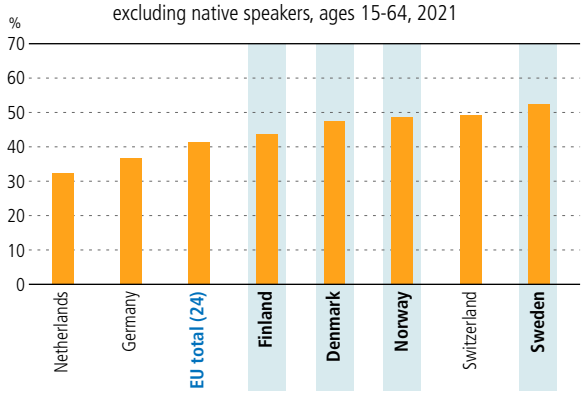
The gaps in reading scores between native-born children with native-born and foreign-born parents are large in all Nordic countries

Mean PISA reading scores, ages 15-16, 2022



Around one in two humanitarian migrants reach advanced language proficiency after at least five years in the host country

Share of humanitarian migrants with at least self-reported advanced language proficiency after 5 years or more in the host country, excluding native speakers, ages 15-64, 2021



1 The context for immigrant integration

Key takeaways

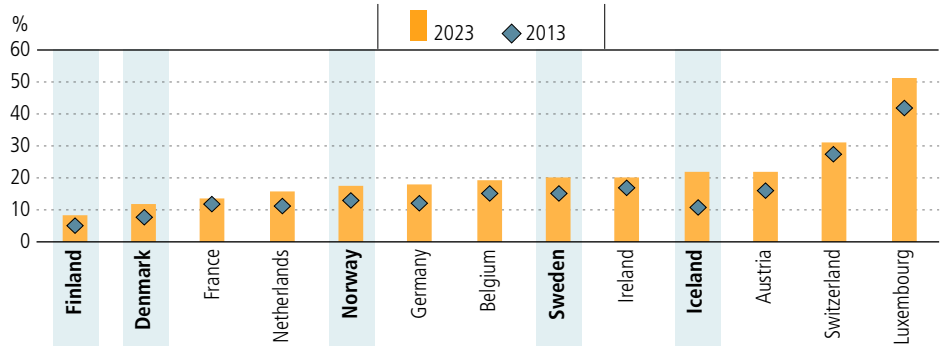
- Between 2013 and 2023, EU free movement was the largest category of entry into the Nordic countries. In addition, family migration, labour migration and humanitarian migration from third countries accounted for a significant proportion of permanent migration flows in some Nordic countries.
- The immigrant population in the Nordic countries is considerably younger than the native-born population. Around two-thirds of immigrants are of prime-working age (25-54 years old), compared to one-third of the native-born.

Migrants account for an increasing share of the total population in the Nordic countries. In 2023, 4.4 million immigrants lived in the Nordic countries, representing an increase of almost 50% compared to a decade earlier. Iceland has the fewest immigrants (82 000), followed by Finland (477 000) and Denmark (698 000). The largest immigrant populations are found in Norway (957 000) and Sweden (2 144 000). Although the absolute number of immigrants in the Nordic countries may seem modest in international comparison, the proportion of immigrants in the total population is relatively high, especially in Sweden (20%) and Iceland (22%) (see **Figure 1**). Most immigrants living in the Nordic countries originate from other Nordic countries, Poland, the Baltic countries, the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Romania, Syria and Iraq. Over the past ten years, the shares of immigrants in the total population have risen by 3-5 p.p. in most Nordic countries and 11 p.p. in Iceland.

Figure 1

Immigrants account for a relatively high share of the population in Sweden and Iceland

Share of immigrants among the total population, all ages, 2013 and 2023 or most recent year available



Note: Data for Ireland is for 2022.

Source: OECD Statistics – International Migration Database (IMD) 2013 and 2023.

In addition to their foreign-born populations, the Nordic countries are home to rising populations of native-born individuals with migrant parents. The share of native-born with foreign-born parents in the total populations ranges from 2% in Iceland and Finland – where immigration is a relatively recent phenomenon (see **Box 2**) – to 7% in Sweden, with Denmark and Norway in between at 4% (Statistics Iceland, 2024[2]; Statistics Finland, 2024[3]; Statistics Sweden, 2024[4]; Statistics Denmark, 2024[5]; Statistics Norway, 2025[6]). This is comparable with other destination countries, such as Germany (6%), Austria (7%) and Switzerland (8%).

Box 2 **Immigration in the Nordic countries: A historical overview**

Until the mid-20th century, the Nordic countries shared a long history of emigration with large outflows to North America and, in Finland's case, to Sweden. Immigration gained momentum only after the Second World War, when rapid economic expansion created demand for foreign labour. Early inflows came largely from neighbouring Nordic countries, facilitated by the Nordic Passport Union of 1954, and later from Southern and Eastern Europe. From the 1970s onwards, humanitarian migration became increasingly important, with successive inflows from regions affected by conflict, notably Latin America, the Middle East, the Balkans, and the Horn of Africa. EU enlargement in 2004 led to strong labour migration from Central and Eastern Europe, while the 2015 refugee crisis and, more recently, displacement from Ukraine increased immigration flows for humanitarian reasons.

Immigration to **Sweden** expanded significantly in the 1990s, when refugees arrived from the Balkans, Iraq and Somalia. In the 2000s, inflows from Iraq were among the largest, alongside family migration from Iran and Turkey. EU enlargement in 2004 brought strong arrivals from Poland, Romania and Baltic countries. The last decade has been marked by large humanitarian arrivals. In 2015, Sweden received more than 160 000 asylum seekers – the highest per-capita inflow in the OECD – dominated by Syrians (51 000), Afghans (41 000, of whom over half were unaccompanied minors), and Iraqis (21 000). These groups remain among the fastest-growing diasporas. Since 2022, Sweden has also received more than 60 000 displaced Ukrainians.

Norway's immigration diversified rapidly from the 1990s onwards. The Balkan wars brought large inflows of Bosnians and Kosovars, while Somalis and Iraqis also represented major groups. At the same time, arrivals from Pakistan and Vietnam – who had settled earlier – grew through family reunification. Since the 2000s, EU/EEA free movement has dominated, particularly from Poland and Lithuania. The 2015 refugee crisis increased arrivals from Syria, Eritrea and Afghanistan, while since 2022 Norway has received more than 70 000 Ukrainians.

In **Denmark**, the 1990s saw significant arrivals from the Balkans, as well as family and humanitarian inflows from Iraq, Lebanon and Somalia. The number of Turkish and Pakistani migrants, who had arrived earlier as labour migrants, continued to grow through family reunification. From the mid-2000s, EU free mobility brought large inflows from Poland, Romania and Germany, which remain important groups today. The 2015 refugee inflows consisted mainly of Syrians and Eritreans, though numbers declined quickly afterwards. Since 2022, Ukrainians have become one of the largest new groups.

Finland has a relatively shorter immigration history and until the 1990s, immigration was largely limited to the return of Ingrian Finns from the former Soviet Union – notably Russia and Estonia. At the same time, asylum seekers from Somalia and from the former Yugoslavia also began arriving in Finland during the aftershocks of the Soviet collapse. During the 2000s, Iraqis became one of the largest groups of asylum seekers, alongside family migration from Russia and Estonia. In the past decade, immigration has risen sharply. In 2015, Finland received over 32 000 asylum seekers, two-thirds of them from Iraq and others from Afghanistan and Somalia. Since 2022, more than 65 000 Ukrainians have registered in Finland.

Iceland's immigration has been relatively recent and largely driven by labour demand. Early inflows came from Poland and were later joined by Lithuanians and Latvians following EU enlargement. The 2015 refugee crisis brought arrivals from Syria and Iraq, while since 2022 arrivals from Ukraine have been substantial in relation to Iceland's small population.

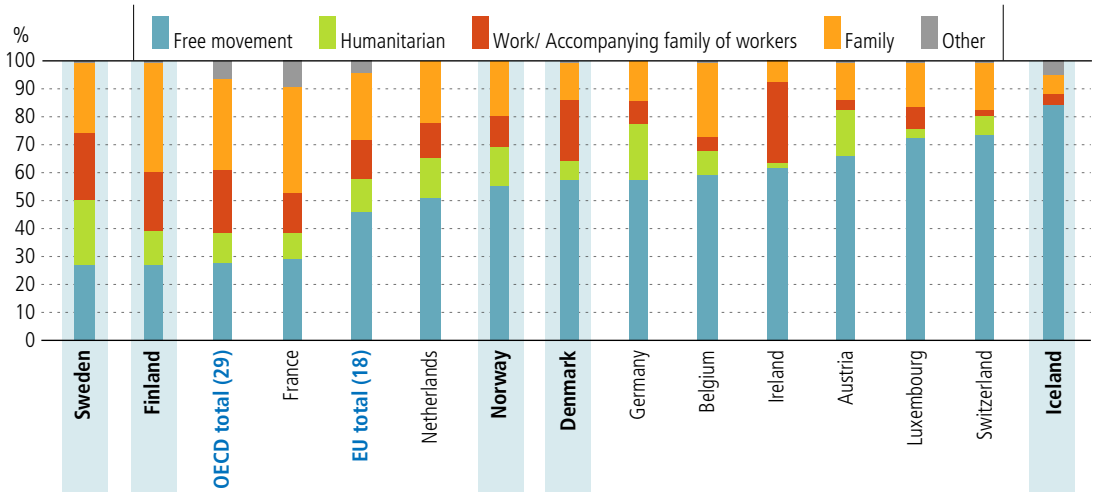
Source: OECD (2016[7]), OECD (2018[8]), OECD (2022[9]), OECD (2024[10]).

The Nordic countries host a diverse migrant population. Immigrants come from a wide range of countries, with varied education and employment backgrounds, and different categories of entry. EU free movement is the main driver of migration to Norway, Denmark and Iceland. Between 2013 and 2023, nearly six in ten permanent immigrants to Norway and Denmark arrived under the EU's free movement scheme (see **Figure 2**). In Iceland, free movement accounted for more than 80% of permanent migration. In Sweden and Finland, the proportion was significantly lower, at about one in four immigrants – the lowest shares in the comparison group and about 20 p.p. below the EU total.[2] In these two Nordic countries, migration from third countries played a more important role. Family migrants made up 39% of permanent inflows to Finland and 25% to Sweden. Together with France and Belgium, these were the highest figures in the comparison group. The shares of family migrants were considerably lower in Norway (19%), Denmark (13%) and Iceland (7%). During the same period, a significant proportion of migrants in the Nordic countries arrived through the labour migration channel. The share was particularly high in Sweden (24%), Denmark (22%) and Finland (21%), where it was the highest in international comparison after Ireland. At the same time, Sweden also received the highest proportion of humanitarian migrants (23%) in the comparison group, surpassing Germany by 3 p.p. In the other Nordic countries, the share of humanitarian migrants was considerably lower, ranging from 7% in Denmark to 14% in Norway.

Figure 2

EU free movement is the largest category of entry to the Nordic countries, but humanitarian migrants account for a sizeable share of flows in some countries

Composition of permanent immigration flows, by category of entry, all ages, 2013-2023



Note: Countries are sorted in ascending order of free movement inflows. The OECD collects and standardises administrative data by category of residence permit from OECD countries. Permanent immigrants are foreign nationals of any age who received a residence permit that, under normal circumstances, grants them the right to stay permanently in the host country. This includes foreigners who obtain a permanent residence permit upon entry, those who have an initial temporary residence permit routinely and indefinitely renewed or transformed into permanent residence, and free movement migrants (excluding those on short-term stays). Temporary immigrants who become permanent-type residents following a change in their status are also included, such as students taking up employment after completing their studies. The data for Iceland is not fully comparable with that from other countries as it is taken directly from Statistics Iceland and has not been standardised.

Source: OECD Statistics – International Migration Database (IMD) 2013-2023, and Statistics Iceland 2013-2023.

Permanent immigration flows have changed greatly over the last decade. While the proportion of flows accounted for by EU free movement increased in Denmark and Sweden between 2013 and 2023 (by 12 p.p. and 9 p.p., respectively), it declined in Norway and Finland (by 13 p.p. and 25 p.p., respectively). At the same time, in the context of strong efforts to attract international talent (see **Box 3**) the proportion of labour migration increased considerably in all Nordic countries: by 5 p.p. in Denmark, 6 p.p. in Norway, 9 p.p. in Sweden and 24 p.p. in Finland. In contrast, the proportion of flows accounted for by humanitarian migration has fallen in all Nordic countries, with the largest decline observed in Sweden (-21 p.p.), where a stark turnaround in public attitudes and political orientation have had a marked impact.

2. The EU and OECD totals are calculated by aggregating the values of the Member States and relating them to the aggregated population. This provides a population-weighted measure that more accurately represents the EU/OECD as a whole than an unweighted average would.

The native-born population in the Nordic countries holds positive views on migrants, the most favourable across the EU in 2020. Attitudes generally improved between 2010 and 2020, except in Sweden, where negative perceptions have risen following the 2015 refugee crisis (OECD/European Commission, 2023[11]). On the other hand, across the region, perceptions on integration policy are less favourable – particularly in Sweden (OECD, 2020[11]) – with employment and language skills seen as key for a successful integration.

Box 3 **Policies to attract international skills – "Talent boost" Finland**

Talent Boost is a cross-sectoral, multi-year programme (2023-2027) spearheaded by Finland's Ministries of Economic Affairs and Employment and Education and Culture. The programme seeks to attract, integrate, and retain international skilled workers, students, researchers, and entrepreneurs – from EU/EEA nations and targeted third countries (India, Brazil, Vietnam, Philippines) – to address labour shortages, support innovation and foster economic vitality.

Key activities within the programme include enhanced country branding (#FinlandWorks), accelerated residence-permit processes (through risk-based streamlining and partial automation), regional Talent Hubs to assist talent locally and safeguards against exploitation.

Since its implementation, permit processing times have fallen dramatically (from 146 to less than 30 days, with specialist permits in as little as one week) and arrival rates have surged.

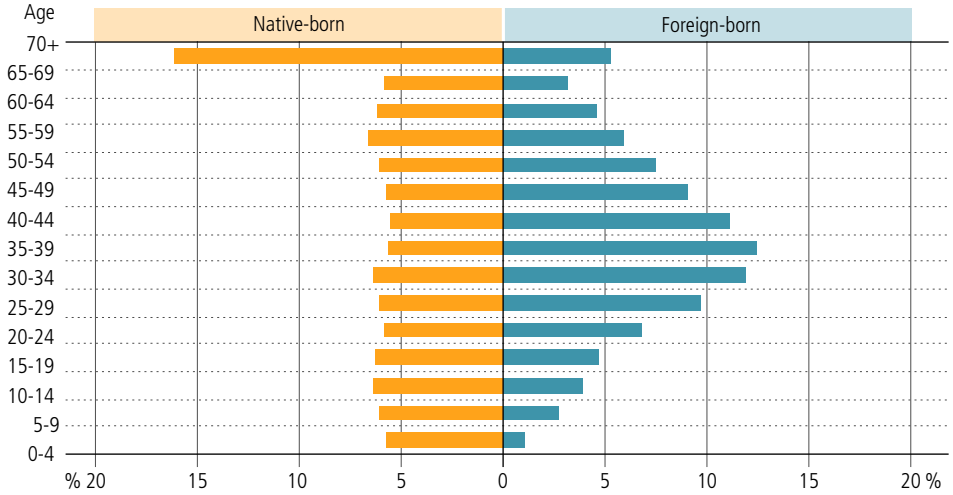
Source: Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland (2025[12]), OECD (2018[8]), European Commission (2024[13]).

The immigrant population in the Nordic countries is considerably younger than the native-born population. More than 80% of immigrants are of working age (15-64), representing an important labour market potential (see **Figure 3**). By contrast, the proportion of native-born of working-age is 20 p.p. lower. The gap is even wider among the prime working-age population (25-54): 62% of immigrants belong to this age group, compared to 35% of the native-born. Iceland has the highest proportion of immigrants of working age (88%), followed by Norway and Finland (85%), and Denmark (83%). In Sweden, a country with a relatively longer history of migration (see **Box 2**), the proportion of working age immigrants is marginally lower (79%). It is also the Nordic country where the proportion of the immigrant population aged 65+ is highest (15%).

Figure 3

Almost two out of three migrants in the Nordic countries are of prime working age (25-54)

Age distribution of native- and foreign-born in the Nordic countries, Nordic average, 2024



Source: Nordic Statistics database 2024.

II Skills and labour market integration

Key takeaways

- More than one in three immigrants in the Nordic countries holds a tertiary degree. The proportion of recent migrants (less than ten years of residence) with tertiary degrees has increased considerably over the past ten years.
- Migrants participate in language courses at high rates and make good progress in language learning. After residing in the country for at least five years, one in three immigrants who arrived with beginner or no language skills report speaking the local language fluently.
- The employment rates of migrants in the Nordic countries vary greatly depending on their origin. As in many other major destinations, EU-born migrants are employed at slightly higher rates than the native-born (76-87%), while employment rates are considerably lower among the non-EU born (65-80%).
- Regardless of their origin, women in the Nordic countries have some of the highest employment rates in the comparison group, and gender gaps are relatively small. However, important gaps between non-EU born women and their native-born peers persist.

II.1. Education

There is wide variation in the educational levels of immigrants in the Nordic countries. The education levels of EU-born migrants are high in international comparison. In all Nordic countries, more than one in three migrants has a tertiary qualification, a rate slightly higher than the EU total (30%) (see **Figure 4**). This is largely driven by EU migrants arriving through free movement schemes for work. Indeed, both in Sweden and Denmark – where the proportion of highly-educated migrants is particularly high among those born within the EU – the proportion of the population holding a tertiary degree is higher among immigrants than it is among the native-born (by 1 p.p. and 3 p.p., respectively). The gap is even wider when comparing EU-born migrants with the native-born, at 13 p.p. and 14 p.p. In Finland, on the other hand, the share of highly educated migrants falls 8 p.p. below that of the native-born (and a gap of 5 p.p. can be observed between EU migrants and native-born).

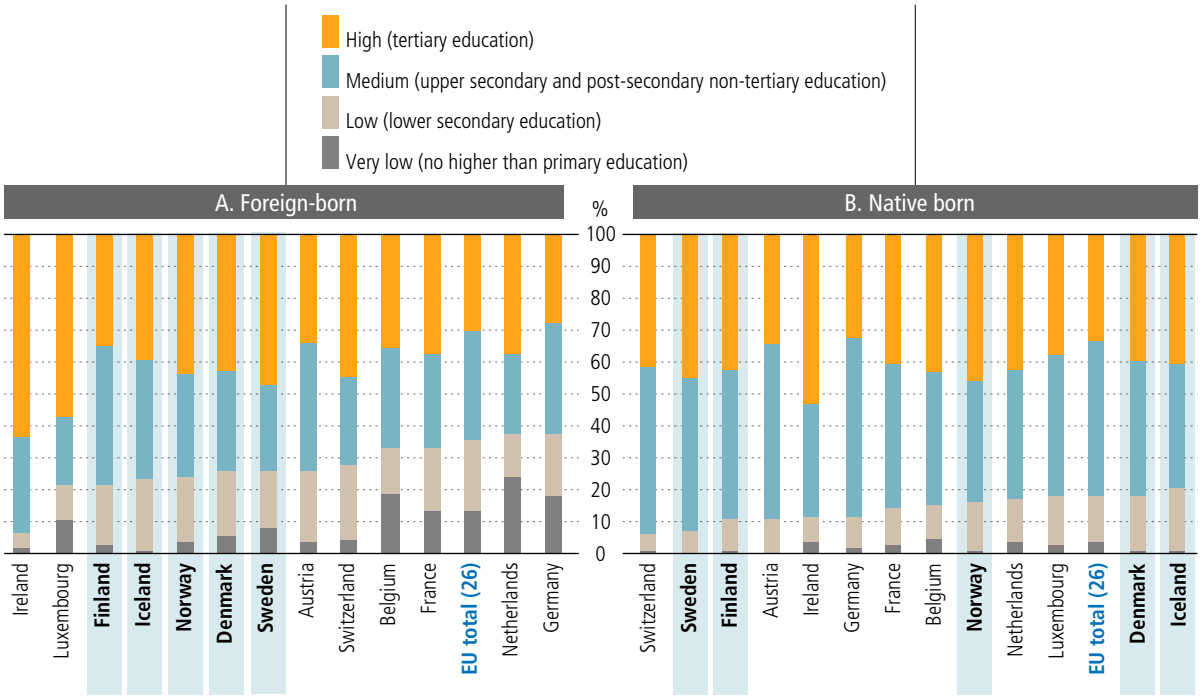
The proportion of immigrants with a low level of education – up to lower secondary – is low by international comparisons. At around 25%, the proportion of immigrants holding a low or very low level of education is about 10 p.p. lower than the EU total, and only slightly higher than the shares observed in Ireland and Luxembourg – countries with a strong preponderance of labour migrants. However, the share of low-educated immigrants, with the exception of Iceland, is considerably higher than that of the native-born population (a gap between 7 p.p. and 11 p.p. in Norway, Denmark and Finland). The gap is widest in Sweden, at 18 p.p., and likely reflects Sweden's strong history of accommodating humanitarian migrants as well as the low share of native-born persons with low levels of education (OECD, 2016[7]). Higher shares of low-educated are generally observed among non-EU born immigrants. This is particularly noticeable in Sweden and Denmark, where around 30% of non-EU born immigrants have no more than lower secondary education.

In some Nordic countries, a non-negligible share of migrants – 8% in Sweden and 5% in Denmark – hold only a very low level of education. This stands in stark contrast to the native-born populations where such low levels of education are not observed. While the numbers of very low educated migrants do not stand out as unusual in international comparison – indeed they are below the EU total, and substantially below those observed in Luxembourg, Belgium, France, the Netherlands and Germany – they are nonetheless stark in domestic comparison. Indeed, integrating migrants with such a low level of education into highly skilled Nordic labour markets, has proven to be a long road requiring substantial training and activation support.

Figure 4

Over one in three immigrants in the Nordic countries have completed tertiary education

Educational levels, population not in formal education, ages 15-64, 2023



Note: Countries are sorted in ascending order of the sum of very low and low educational levels.

Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

Between 2010 and 2023, the proportion of highly educated immigrants increased substantially in the Nordic countries. Indeed, among those with less than ten years of residence, the share of highly-educated migrants increased by 7 p.p. in Finland, 8 p.p. in Sweden, 16 p.p. in Norway and 22 p.p. in Denmark – a strong increase in an international context.[3] This strong increase in the share of highly-educated migrants in Denmark was almost double that seen among the native-born, while in Sweden the share of highly-educated foreign born grew by just half the percentage point increase seen among the native-born. The latter is partly explained by increased migration through EU free movement and by efforts in the region to attract international talent. At the same time, the share of recent immigrants with very low or low levels of education decreased in all Nordic countries. The decline was most pronounced in Finland (-5 p.p.) and Denmark (-7 p.p.), reflecting the decline in the share of humanitarian migrants.

3. The rise in Finland and Sweden was comparable to that observed in the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany during the same period.

II.2. Language acquisition

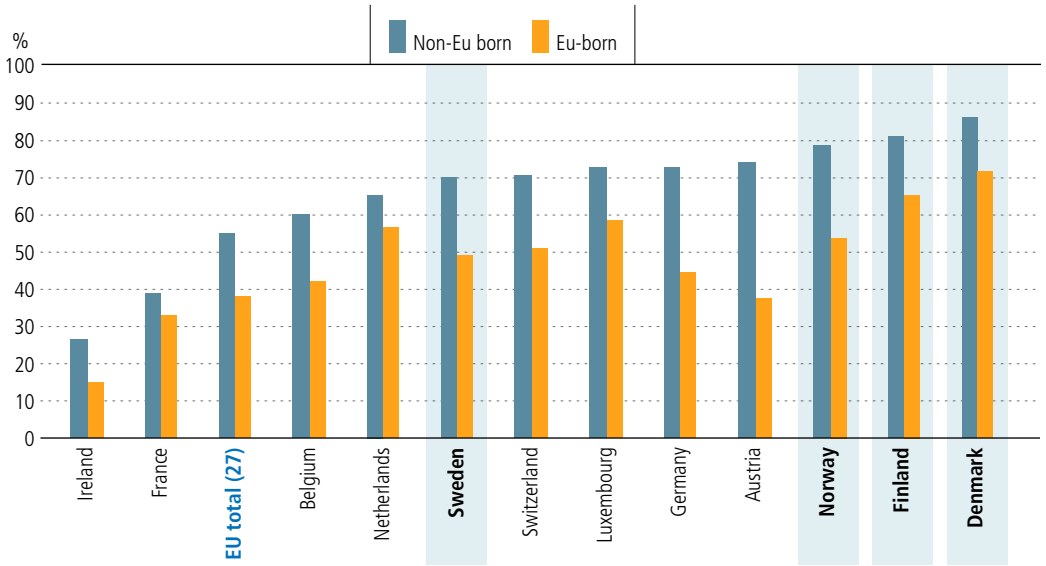
Language training is an important pillar of migrant integration in the Nordic countries. Learning the national language is a prerequisite for successful integration into the labour market and wider society. This is particularly pertinent in the Nordic countries, where only around one in ten immigrants is fluent in the local language upon arrival.[4] In other long-standing destinations, notably English-, German- and French-speaking countries, these shares are considerably higher. Additionally, the linguistic proximity between the Nordic languages and migrants' native languages is often weaker than in other countries. For many years now, the Nordic countries have invested heavily in language training for migrants and offer a wide range of formal and non-formal language training services (see **Box 4**) (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2023[14]). This is reflected in the high participation rates in language courses among both EU-born and non-EU born migrants.

More than one in two immigrants with less than ten years of residence in the Nordic countries has taken a language course. Participation is particularly high among non-EU born migrants in Denmark (86%), Finland (81%) and Norway (79%) and is slightly lower in Sweden (70%) (see **Figure 5**). These rates are higher than the EU total (55%) and of most of comparable countries. Participation rates do not seem to be linked exclusively to access or costs of language training. In Sweden, where courses are free and available to all immigrants, participation is lowest. In Denmark and Finland, where participation rates are higher, attendance is a formal requirement of integration programmes and is linked to social benefits. Other reasons for not participating in language courses include limited time, family commitments and ability to learn (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2023[14]).

Figure 5

More than half of immigrants participate in language courses across the Nordic countries

Self-reported participation in language courses among immigrants with less than 10 years of residence, excluding native speakers, ages 15-64, 2021



Note: Countries are sorted in ascending order of the share of non-EU born immigrants participating in language courses.

Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2021.

4. The indicators on language skills are based on data from the 2021 Ad-hoc module of the European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) on the labour market situation of migrants and their immediate descendants. The indicators measure the language skills of immigrants, considering only the skills for spoken interaction. Language proficiency is divided into four levels: mother tongue, advanced (proficient user – CEFR level C1), intermediate (independent user – CEFR level B1), and beginner (basic user – CEFR level A1) or less (hardly any or no language skills). "Mother tongue" refers to the first language learned at home in childhood and still understood by the individual at the time of the survey.

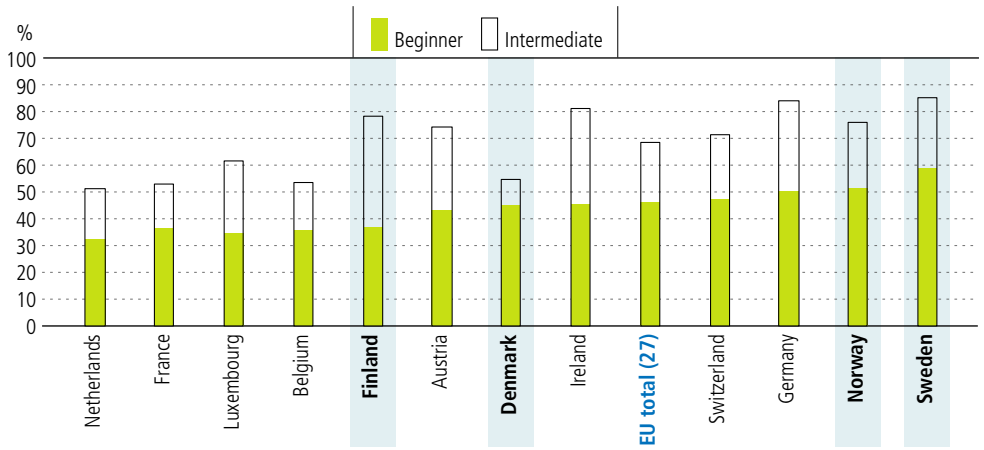
By comparison, participation rates among EU-born migrants are lower than those of their counterparts born outside the EU by 15 or more p.p. in all countries. This may be partly due to restricted access to this type of migrants or the need to pay for these courses. However, participation is also low in Sweden, where EU-born migrants have free unlimited access, suggesting additional factors behind low participation rates. These may include limited need of the host language at work, greater reliance on English or other languages, proficiency of the host-country language at arrival, shorter expected stays or stronger social ties with EU-born diaspora. Many OECD countries are using online technologies, including Artificial Intelligence, to support the provision of language training for migrants (see **Box 5**).

More than one in three migrants who arrived in a Nordic country with beginner's knowledge of the local language or less, reports speaking it at an advanced level or higher after at least five years in the country (see **Figure 6**). The highest rates of self-reported language proficiency are achieved by immigrants in Norway and Sweden (more than 50%). Finland and Denmark are in the middle of the distribution and slightly below the EU total. In almost all Nordic countries, EU-born migrants who arrived with basic language proficiency make greater progress in language acquisition than non-EU born migrants, with a gap between both groups of around 11 p.p. in Finland and Denmark, and as much as 28 p.p. in Sweden. However, in Norway, non-EU born migrants progress faster than EU-born migrants – 53% of non-EU born migrants report reaching fluency after five years compared to 48% of EU-born migrants. The difference in achievement rates between non-EU and EU-born groups may be related to the higher qualifications of the EU-born compared to non-EU born. Furthermore, migrants who arrive in their host country with intermediate language skills, make even greater progress in acquiring the local language. After at least five years, more than three in four migrants in Finland, Norway and Sweden speak the local language fluently. In Denmark, this figure is lower at 55% and the gap with those who arrived with beginner's knowledge is much smaller. Given the linguistic distance between the host-country and immigrant's native languages, these results constitute a remarkable achievement. Although there is no directly comparable data available for Iceland, survey data indicates that fewer than 20% of immigrants reach an advanced level of proficiency in Icelandic – the lowest share in the OECD (OECD, 2024[10]). These low levels of language acquisition are indicative of the relatively limited integration infrastructure in Iceland, where the short history of hosting migrants, and the initially temporary nature has not yet generated an integration system as developed as in some of Iceland's Nordic neighbours. Notably, Iceland's public expenditure on language courses for migrants relative to its immigrant population is very low compared to other Nordic countries (OECD, 2024[10]).

Figure 6

More than one in two migrants in Sweden and Norway who arrived with basic knowledge of the national language reach fluency after five years

Percentage of immigrants who have reached advanced or higher host-country language proficiency depending on their language skills upon arrival, immigrants with at least 5 years of residence, ages 15-64, 2021



Note: Countries are sorted in ascending order of the share of immigrants who arrived with beginner's knowledge or less of the local language. Data for Iceland is not available.

Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2021.

Box 4 **Language skills are a key pillar of integration in the Nordic countries**

Knowledge of the host-country language is a key skill for migrants to participate fully in society. All Nordic countries, except Iceland, provide formal language training as part of their integration programmes for adult immigrants. One of the main differences across Nordic countries is eligibility to participate in formal language training free of charge. Denmark and Sweden provide free courses to all legally residing immigrants, while in Finland, Iceland and Norway some migrants are not eligible to participate free of charge. Across the region, language training is generally combined with non-formal language services and other integration activities to encourage practical use of the language in real-life settings.

Denmark

All immigrants with a residence permit are eligible for language training, but access, duration, and costs vary depending on the type of residence permit. Foreign nationals, who participate in language training as part of an integration program, are entitled to free courses for a maximum of 15 hours per week. Labour migrants, students, and their family members may also participate in language training for up to 3 years and 9 months, under a deposit scheme, which is refunded upon completion.

Finland

Language training is a key element of the immigrants' integration plan. Publicly funded courses are generally reserved for refugees, reunified family members and unemployed immigrants with a residence permit. These groups are both eligible and required to participate as part of their integration process. Training is free of charge during the one to two-year integration plan, and it is often combined with other integration activities. Immigrants who are registered as unemployed jobseekers are also eligible to participate in language courses free of charge. This structure allows participants to combine work experience and language practice.

Iceland

Iceland is the only Nordic country without a comprehensive national policy on immigrant language training. Municipalities receiving refugees via the co-ordinated reception of refugees scheme are, however, obliged to co-ordinate with the local Directorate of Labour to provide funded access to language training for refugees. Jobseekers receiving unemployment benefits can also access fully funded training via the Directorate of Labour. For most other migrants, however, courses are not publicly funded. Public expenditure on language training remains far lower than in neighbouring countries.

Norway

All immigrants with a residence permit, except EU/EEA labour migrants, can access formal language training. However, conditions differ by status. Refugees, reunited family members, and family members of Nordic citizens are entitled to free courses for 18 months to 3 years. Labour migrants and immigrants from outside the EEA/EFTA must take language courses to obtain a residence permit, but they must cover the costs themselves (personally or through their employer). A new voucher scheme was implemented in 2021 which allows immigrants without free access to training to purchase Norwegian classes. Training continues until participants meet the required proficiency level (A2-B2 depending on the individual integration plan) or when they complete 300 hours. Skills Norway also provides options for vocational oriented language courses, including work-place specific training.

Sweden

All registered immigrants aged 16 and above are entitled to free language training without a time limit provided by the municipalities. Participation is encouraged early in the integration process to facilitate labour market participation. Sweden also combines language training with practical activities to enhance functional learning. It has developed profession-specific language courses for groups such as academics, engineers, healthcare workers, craftsmen and drivers.

Source: OECD (2024[10]), OECD (2021[15]), Nordic Council of Ministers (2023[14]).

Box 5 **Artificial intelligence as a tool to support language training**

Artificial intelligence offers significant potential to support language learning, particularly in the context of migrant integration. AI-powered tools can provide personalised and adaptive instruction, tailoring content to individual learners' needs and progress, thereby increasing the efficiency of learning. Real-time feedback on grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation supports continuous improvement, while advances in natural language processing enables interactive practice through realistic dialogue simulations. These tools are easily scalable and accessible across a range of devices, offering flexible and cost-effective learning opportunities for migrants who may face barriers to traditional education – particularly those juggling language study with care and work obligations.

Given this potential, language learning has been leading the way in the use of AI for integration and many OECD countries have developed initiatives in this area. In Germany, the "Ankommen" ("Arrive") app, Co-developed by the German government, combines language lessons, integration course information, and job search tools, while in Finland AI is used in online Finnish and Swedish learning platforms tailored for immigrants. Austria has expanded its online learning platform Sprachportal.at for migrants to improve their language proficiency and, since January 2023, the Austrian Integration Fund has been issuing digital certificates for integration and language tests, streamlining the process of language accreditation for migrants. In Australia, a new national curriculum and digital delivery model is being developed to improve English language training for migrants, while in Norway, counties have begun using digital tools to deliver Norwegian language and social studies training to full-time upper secondary students in the introduction programme.

Building on the opportunities for the use of AI in recognition, Germany has created a national AI-assisted programme, Germany IQ (Integration through Qualification), that provides advice, vocational training, and support for the recognition of foreign qualifications. Alongside this, efforts are being made to enhance the use of AI to verify the authenticity and completeness of documents and translate them into German. Meanwhile, Estonia has introduced an AI-driven diploma recognition system, allowing migrants to upload credentials digitally for assessment.

Source: OECD (2025[16]).

II.3. Skills acquisition and recognition

More than one in four immigrants of prime working-age (25-54) in the Nordic countries participates in adult education and training. This places the Nordic countries at the top of the comparison group, alongside Switzerland and the Netherlands (see **Figure 7**). In Norway, Denmark and Sweden, migrants participate in adult education at almost the same rate as the native-born. In Iceland, the participation rates among the foreign-born are lower than among the native-born by 6 p.p. In Finland, the opposite is true: migrants participate in adult education more frequently than the native-born (by 6 p.p.). Ireland is the only other country in the comparison group where this is also the case. All Nordic countries include adult education and training in their integration plan for migrants. However, although most countries strongly encourage adult training, it is only formally required to qualify for permanent residency in Norway.

A high share of the foreign-born continue their formal education after migrating to the Nordic countries. According to the 2023 EU-LFS, around one in ten migrants in Iceland, Norway and Denmark took part in formal learning activities in the four weeks preceding the survey (see **Figure 7**). This figure was particularly high in Sweden (16%) and Finland (21%), exceeding that of any other major destination. In addition, 14-24% of migrants took part in non-formal learning activities, which are defined as learning that occurs outside of

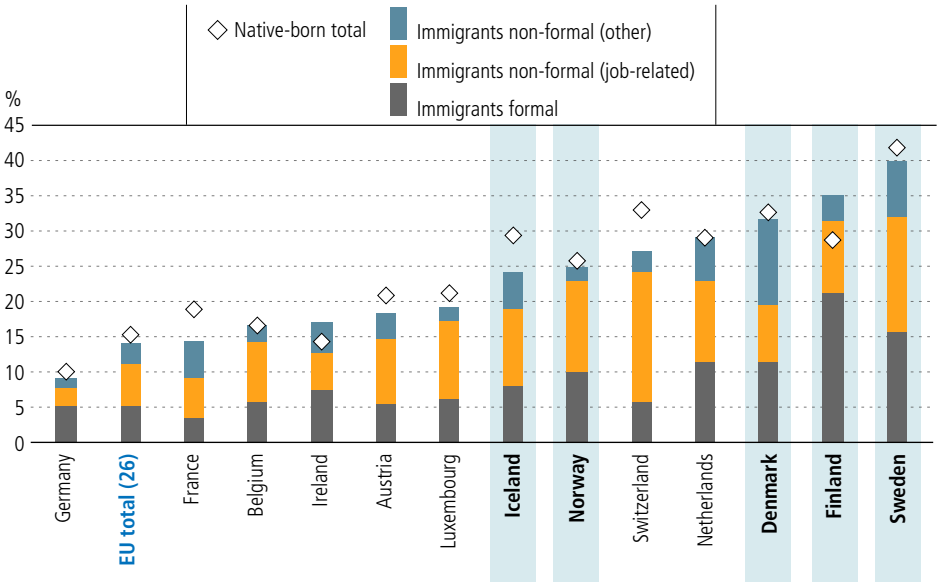
formal institutions like schools, colleges and universities. Most non-formal learning activities in the Nordic countries were job-related. Denmark was the only country where more migrants participated in non-job-related non-formal learning activities aimed at developing skills required for personal, community, domestic, social or recreational purposes. The participation rates of immigrants in non-formal adult education in the Nordic countries are similar to those in Switzerland and the Netherlands.

Participation in formal learning activities decreases with increasing length of stay in the Nordic countries, while participation in non-formal learning activities either stays the same or increases. This shift is particularly evident in Sweden, where 30% of migrants who have been in the country for fewer than five years participate in formal adult education, compared to 22% in non-formal education. This is likely driven, to a large extent, by participation in Sweden's Introduction Plan – a two-year programme provided by the Public Employment Service, and associated allowance, offered to all those between 20 and 65 years old who have recently received a residence permit as a refugee, a person in need of protection, or a family member of a refugee or a person in need of protection. Among migrants who have resided in the country for over ten years, only 8% participate in formal education and 26% in non-formal education. Migrant women are more likely to participate in adult education and training than migrant men in all Nordic countries.

Figure 7

Participation in adult education and training is high in the Nordic countries

Self-reported participation in adult education and training in the four weeks preceding the survey, ages 25-54, 2023



Note: Countries are sorted in ascending order of the share of immigrants participating in adult education and training.

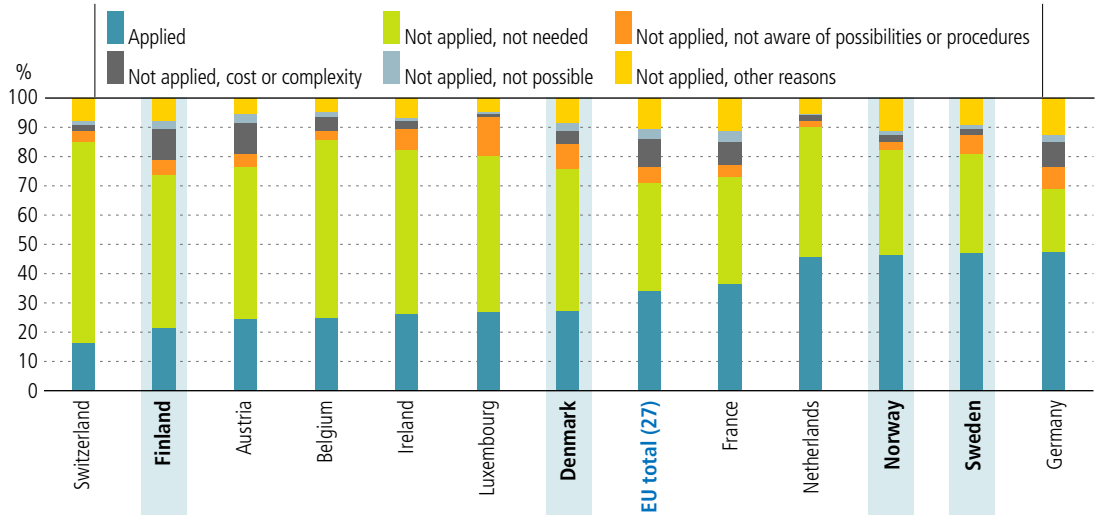
Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

Almost half of migrants with tertiary education qualifications in Norway and Sweden apply for their foreign qualifications to be recognised. These are the highest application rates (46% and 47%, respectively) after Germany (48%) (see **Figure 8**). In Denmark and Finland, however, the rates are considerably lower, at 22% and 27% respectively, and below the EU total of 34%. Among those with a tertiary degree who did not seek recognition, the main reason stated was that they did not need it (34-52% in the Nordic countries). In Norway, Denmark and Sweden, where significant efforts have gone into the development of the credential recognition process, less than 5% of migrants reported cost or complexity as the main reason for not applying for recognition. In Finland, this proportion was much higher, at 10%, which was similar to those found in Germany and Austria.

Figure 8

Many highly educated immigrants in Norway and Sweden apply for the recognition of their qualifications

Recognition of formal tertiary qualifications obtained abroad, applied or self-reported reason for not applying, ages 15-64, 2021



Note: Countries are sorted in ascending order of the share of immigrants who applied for recognition.

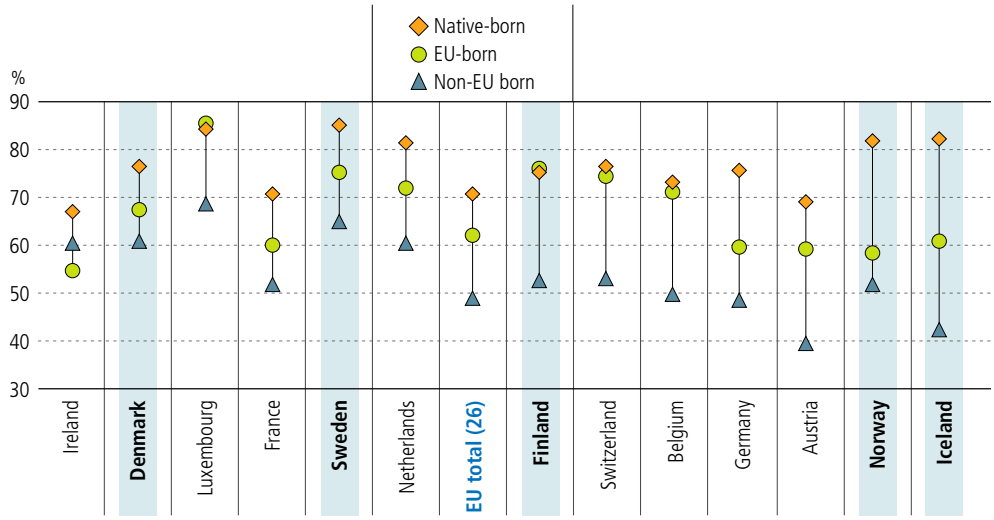
Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2021.

Regardless of their origin, highly educated migrants in the Nordic countries face greater difficulty in finding employment that matches their qualifications than the native-born. This is particularly true of highly educated migrants born outside the EU. Less than two-thirds of non-EU born are employed in high-skilled jobs, at least 15 p.p. fewer than their native-born peers (see **Figure 9**). Somewhat surprisingly, given the strong record of credential recognition, the disparities between the high-skilled foreign- and native-born working in highly skilled jobs is particularly large in Norway (30 p.p.) and Iceland (40 p.p.) – the largest gaps in the comparison group.

Figure 9

Highly educated migrants from outside the EU face difficulties finding a high-skilled job compared to their native-born peers

Share of highly educated native- and foreign-born working in high-skilled jobs, ages 15-64, 2023



Note: Countries are sorted in ascending order of the gap between native-born and non-EU born.

Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

While the employment rates of EU-born migrants are high, they also struggle to find high-skilled jobs in most Nordic countries. The proportion of highly educated EU-born migrants working in high-skilled jobs ranges from 58% in Norway to 75% in Sweden, with gaps vis-à-vis their native-born peers ranging between 9 p.p. and 23 p.p. The only exception is Finland, where EU-born migrants are just as likely to be in high-skilled employment as the native-born (76%).

Sweden stands out for having the highest share of highly educated individuals in high-skilled jobs regardless of country of origin. This outcome may be linked to Sweden's investment in education and skills development (e.g. skill mapping, preparatory education, language acquisition and support). Evidence shows that advanced host-country language skills reduce the risk of being employed in low-skilled jobs (OECD, 2024[10]).

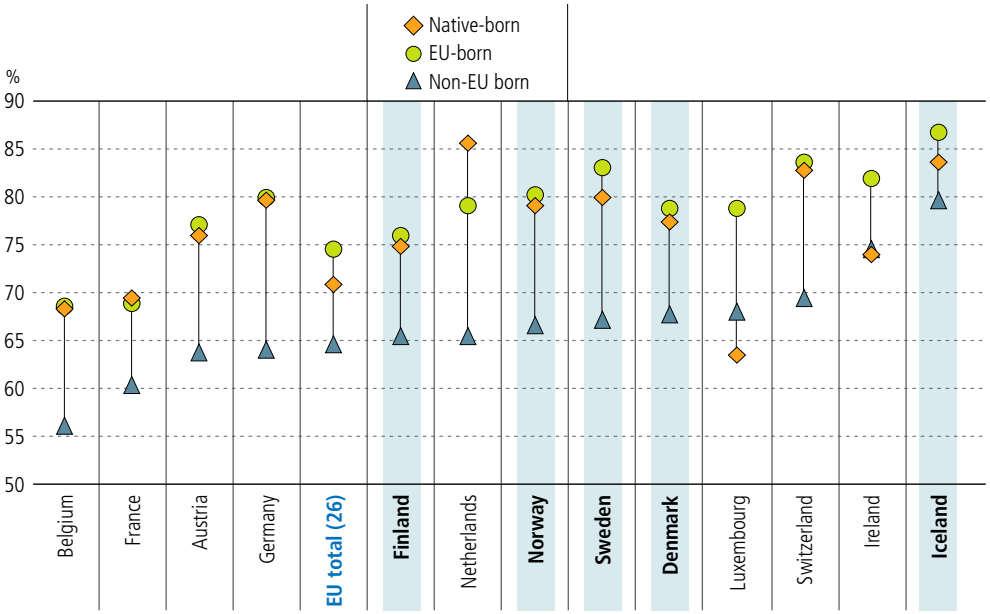
II.4. Labour market integration

The employment rates of immigrants in the Nordic countries are high but vary depending on their region of origin. While migrants born in the EU had slightly higher employment rates than the native-born in all Nordic countries in 2023 (outpacing the native born by up to 3 p.p.), those born outside the EU, conversely, had significantly lower employment rates (lagging by between 4 p.p. and 13 p.p.) (see **Figure 10**).

Figure 10

Employment rates of immigrants are high, particularly in Iceland

Employment rates, ages 15-64, 2023



Note: Countries are sorted in ascending order of the employment rates of non-EU born immigrants.

Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

The gap between the employment rates of non-EU born migrants and those of native-born are largest in Norway and Sweden and only exceeded by Germany and the Netherlands. These gaps are partially explained by the high skill levels required in the Nordic labour market, the share of immigrants who arrive for humanitarian reasons, and the existing high employment rates among the native-born population. Nevertheless, employment rates of non-EU born individuals in most Nordic countries are somewhere in the middle of the distribution, slightly above the EU total of 65%.

Employment rates are particularly high among EU-born migrants in Iceland (87%), Sweden (83%) and Norway (80%). In Denmark and Finland, where employment rates for the native-born are also lower, rates among EU-born migrants are slightly lower at 79% and 76%, respectively. Iceland also has the highest employment rates among non-EU born migrants in the comparison group (80%). In the other Nordic countries,

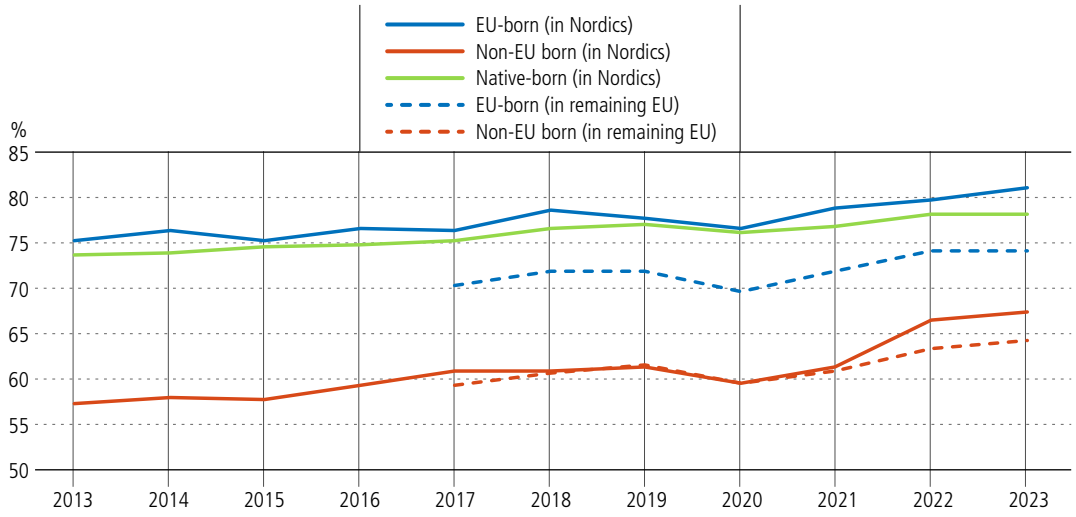
rates are lower: 68% in Denmark, 67% in Sweden and Norway, and 65% in Finland. The difference in employment rates between EU-born and non-EU-born is largest in Norway and Sweden (14 p.p. and 16 p.p., respectively), and smallest in Iceland (7 p.p.).

Employment rates in the Nordic countries have increased considerably over the last ten years among both EU- and non-EU-born immigrants. And, while the impact of the pandemic on the employment rates of the foreign-born was more severe than on those of the native-born, employment rates among the foreign-born have since seen a strong recovery. Since the dip in employment rates seen during the Covid-19 pandemic, employment rates among EU-born immigrants have risen by 1 p.p. to 2 p.p. annually, surpassing 80% for the first time in 2023 (see **Figure 11**). Employment rates among EU-born migrants in the Nordic countries have consistently been around 6 p.p. higher than in the rest of the EU. In contrast, employment rates among non-EU born migrants were comparable to those in the rest of the EU prior to the pandemic, but have since seen a stronger recovery, reaching a record high of 67% in 2023.

Figure 11

Employment rates among immigrants have increased in recent years and are high in international comparison

Employment rates in the Nordic countries, ages 15-64, 2013-2023



Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2013-2023.

Nevertheless, immigrants remain more likely to be unemployed than the native-born, particularly in Finland and Sweden, where the respective gaps are 6 p.p. and 10 p.p. These employment disparities are likely largely attributable to the composition of the migrant population in Finland and Sweden (see **Section I**) and, alongside Austria, are the largest in the comparison group. In the other Nordic countries, the unemployment gaps are slightly smaller (5 p.p. in Norway and 4 p.p. in Denmark), with Iceland, where labour migration dominates, recording one of the smallest gaps in international comparison (2 p.p.). Mirroring the pattern in employment rates, non-EU born immigrants are more likely to be unemployed than those born in the EU. While the differences between EU- and non-EU born immigrants are relatively small in Norway and Denmark, in Iceland and Sweden, non-EU-born immigrants are at least twice as likely to be unemployed as EU-born immigrants, and around three times more likely than the native-born.

The foreign-born also experience long-term unemployment more frequently than the native-born. The long-term unemployment rate is defined as the share of jobseekers who have been without a job for at least 12 months. In Iceland, unemployed migrants are almost twice as likely to be long-term unemployed as the native-born (13% compared to 7%). In Sweden, long-term unemployment is almost three times more prevalent among immigrants (32% compared to 12%). However, long-term unemployment is also widespread among migrants in Denmark, Norway and Finland (15-26%). Nevertheless, this remains below the EU total of 34%.

The lower employment rates and higher unemployment rates of immigrants in the Nordic countries, particularly among non-EU born migrants, are largely the result of a mismatch in the labour market. Nordic labour markets are highly skill-intensive, with limited demand for low-skilled labour – only 4-10% of workers are employed in elementary occupations. At the same time, a relatively large share of non-EU born migrants (23-33%) have reached no more than lower secondary education (see **Section II**). This makes it especially difficult for them to integrate into the workforce.

II.5. Women in the labour market

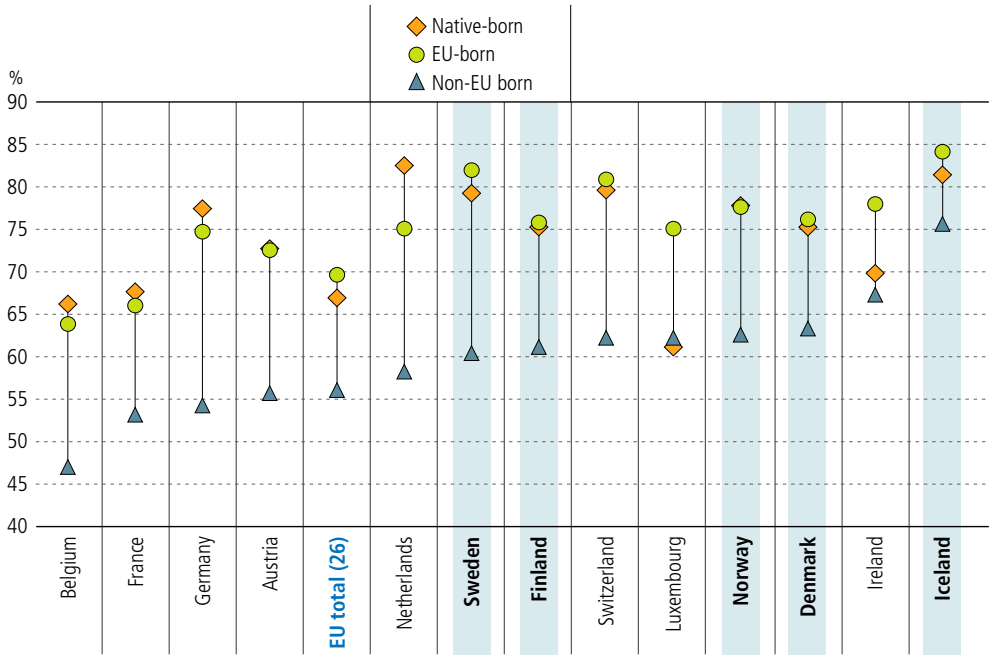
Employment rates of women in the Nordic countries are among the highest in the comparison group, regardless of their origin. EU-born women have the highest employment rates in the comparison group, with rates ranging from 76% in Finland to 84% in Iceland, alongside Ireland, Luxembourg and Switzerland (see **Figure 12**). Furthermore, except for Norway, their employment rates are 1 p.p. to 3 p.p. higher than those of native-born women, which is particularly notable given that women's employment rates in the Nordic countries are already high in an international context (75-81%) and well above the EU total of 65%. By contrast, the employment rates of non-EU born women are lower than those of their native-born and EU-born counterparts. The employment rates of women born outside the EU range from 60% in Sweden to 76% in Iceland. While low in domestic comparison, these rates are higher than in most other comparison countries and exceed the EU total of 56%.

Despite these relatively high rates, employment gaps between native- and non-EU-born women persist. They amount to 6 p.p. in Iceland, around 10 p.p. in Norway and Denmark, 14 p.p. in Finland and 19 p.p. in Sweden. The Swedish gap is the largest in the Nordic region and among the largest across comparison countries, surpassed only by Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands. These disparities partly reflect the very high employment rates of native-born women in the Nordic countries, as well as the large share of non-EU immigrants with low education levels, who struggle to find work in a labour market with limited options for low-skilled workers.

Figure 12

Immigrant women's employment rates are comparatively high, and gaps to native-born women are smaller than in other countries

Women's employment rates, ages 15-64, 2023



Note: Countries are sorted in ascending order of non-EU born women's employment rates.

Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

As elsewhere, unemployment is higher among foreign-born than native-born women. In Sweden and Finland gaps are among the highest in international comparison. While unemployment rates among native-born women in the Nordic countries range between 2% in Norway and 6% in Finland, they reach up to 17% in Sweden among migrant women, meaning they are often at least twice as high. However, the gaps in unemployment between foreign- and native-born women in the different Nordic countries remain close to the gap observed in the EU (5 p.p.), except in Finland and Sweden, where the gaps are among the highest in international comparison (8 p.p. and 12 p.p., respectively). Once unemployed, migrant women face greater difficulty to return to work and are two to four times more likely to remain unemployed for 12 or more months than native-born women. This issue is particularly prevalent in Sweden and Finland, where around one in three unemployed migrant women experience long-term unemployment. However, these rates remain lower than the EU total of 36%.

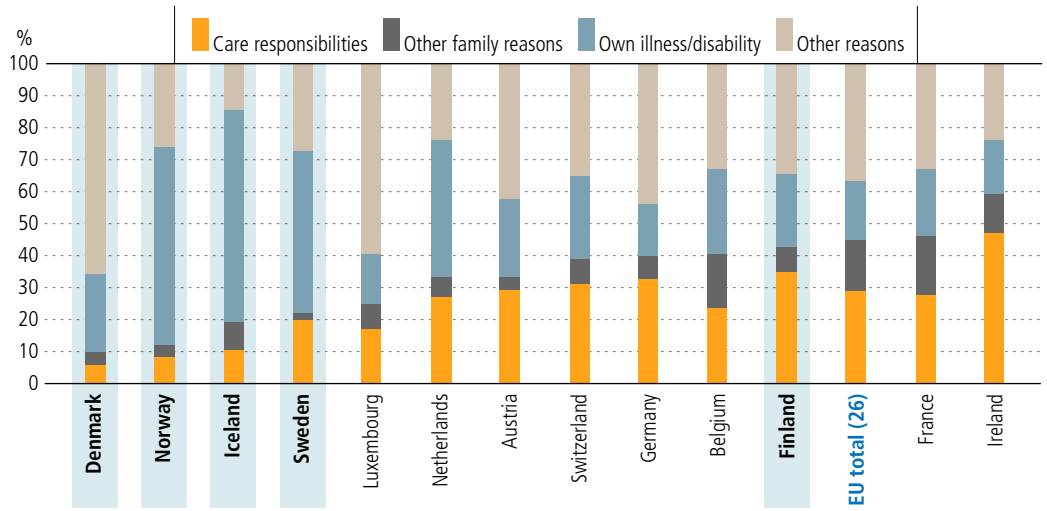
Migrant women tend to have a weaker labour market attachment: they are overrepresented in elementary occupations and are more often employed under less secure conditions, such as temporary or part-time work. The Nordic countries address these challenges through comprehensive family policies that support women's employment, together with flexible, tailor-made and multi-year integration programmes. In Norway, for example, the "Jobbsjansen" (Job Opportunity Programme), a special second chance programme, targets unemployed migrant women who, after some years in the country, still struggle to enter the labour market. About 60% of participants have children (OECD, 2022[9]). In 2025, the Danish government introduced a new work obligation scheme which requires all foreigners receiving cash benefits and not meeting certain residency or employment criteria to contribute actively to Danish society for up to 37 hours per week. The scheme is intended, among other things, to encourage more women from non-Western backgrounds to enter the workforce.

Unlike many other destination countries, the role of care responsibilities in driving labour market inactivity among migrant women is relatively limited (see **Figure 13**). Although migrant women have slightly higher inactivity rates than native-born women (by around 4 p.p.), family and care responsibilities are a barrier to the employment of foreign-born women only in Finland. This pattern may reflect the positive attitudes toward gender equality in the Nordic countries. Across EU countries, foreign-born populations are more likely than native-born to agree that a woman's main responsibility is childcare (OECD/European Commission, 2018[17]). However, approval of this view is lowest among foreign-born groups (both EU and non-EU-born) in the Nordic countries and the Netherlands, where gender equality is deeply rooted in social policies and norms.

Figure 13

Family responsibilities remain a barrier to employment only for women in Finland

Share of inactive immigrant women by reason for inactivity, not in formal education, ages 15-64, 2023



Note: Countries are sorted in ascending order of the sum of care responsibilities and other family reasons. The figure depicts immigrant women who are outside the labour force and are not searching for employment and have not found any job to start later. Other reasons include education or training, retirement, awaiting recall to work (lay-off), no suitable job is available, other personal reasons and not stated.

Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

Women with young children have lower employment rates than women without children in nearly all EU and OECD countries (OECD, 2025[18]). For immigrant women, this "child penalty" is often more pronounced, particularly among those who arrived as refugees or family migrants (OECD, 2024[19]). The weaker attachment to the labour market together with the working conditions of immigrant women can limit their access to parental leave benefits and increase the risk of withdrawing from the labour market after childbirth. Access to paid parental leave differs across the region. In Denmark and Norway, entitlement is closely tied to employment, making it harder for some migrant mothers to qualify. By contrast, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland offer universal access, although the level of entitlement still varies depending on whether it is based on employment or residence. In these Nordic countries, migrant mothers are overrepresented among the beneficiaries of flat-rate benefits (OECD, 2024[19]).

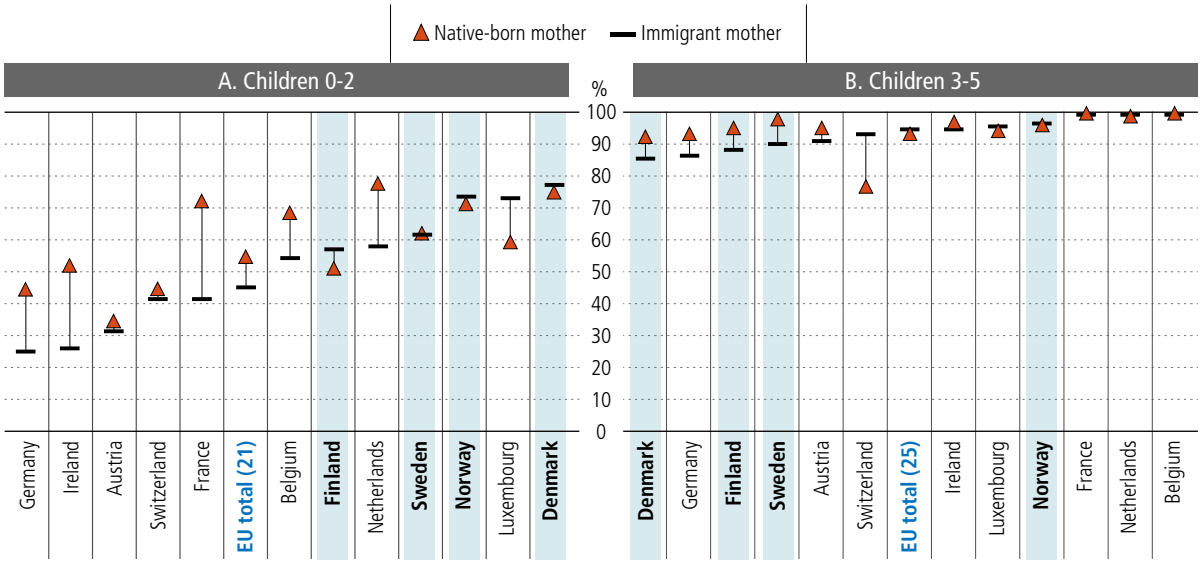
A key issue related to the employment of foreign-born women in the Nordic countries is childcare. The Nordic countries provide comprehensive, publicly funded childcare options from an early age, enabling both parents to pursue paid work (see **Box 6**). Accessible and affordable early childhood education and care (ECEC) is particularly important for migrant mothers who often lack family support in the host country. Over the past decade, ECEC participation among immigrant households has increased in nearly all OECD countries, narrowing or even closing the gap with native-born households – most notably in Norway (OECD/European Commission, 2023[1]).

Women with at least one child aged zero to two years use formal childcare at high rates, regardless of their origin. Alongside Luxembourg and the Netherlands, the Nordic countries have the highest ECEC participation rates of migrant women with children in this age group, ranging from 56% in Finland to 77% in Denmark (see **Figure 14**). Further, in most Nordic countries, migrant mothers with children aged zero to two use ECEC at rates similar to native-born mothers, except in Finland, where participation is higher among foreign-born mothers (5 p.p.). Finland's lower overall ECEC participation may reflect social norms, parental preferences for caregiving and family policies, such as extended parental leave entitlement (154 weeks – around 3 years) and home-care allowance. In Sweden the removal of the cash-for-care allowance (vårdnadsbidrag) had measurable positive effects on both maternal employment and ECEC attendance (Hall, Lindahl and Roman, 2024[20]).

Figure 14

Migrant mothers use formal childcare at similar rates to the native-born

Use of formal childcare services by native- and foreign-born mothers for children aged 0-2 and 3-5, 2023 or latest year available



Note: Countries are sorted in ascending order of the use of formal childcare services by immigrant mothers. The figure depicts the share of children enrolled in formal childcare during a typical week. Formal childcare services include preschool, compulsory school, centre-based services, day-care centres, and professional childminders.

Source: European Union statistics on income and living conditions (EU-SILC) 2023; Germany: EU-SILC 2022.

By contrast, in most Nordic countries, foreign-born women with older children (aged three to five) participate less in ECEC than their native-born counterparts (by around 7 p.p. in Denmark, Finland and Sweden). Uptake among migrant women with children in this age group is lower than in other major destinations, where participation rates often exceed 95%. Norway is the exception, where participation rates are among the highest and there is no gap between foreign- and native-born groups. The latter may be in part explained by the reforms made to provide universal ECEC services and to lower the appeal of cash-for-care schemes, where foreign-born were overrepresented.

Box 6 **ECEC services for immigrant families in the Nordic countries**

The Nordic countries operate comprehensive, publicly supported Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), generally available from the age of one (six months in Denmark). While legal entitlements exist in most countries, immigrant children tend to participate at lower rates than their native-born peers. The barriers to enrolment in early childhood education include costs, limited information, parental preferences and policies that make home care financially attractive. These barriers often play more heavily on the decision calculus of immigrant women, who tend to be less financially secure and have more limited access to information. This is unfortunate because, in many cases, the children of immigrants (and their mothers) have the most to gain from attending ECEC – including language development and access to social networks. Evidence shows that cash-for-care schemes reduce ECEC participation, delay language development and integration, and limit mothers' labour market participation.

In **Finland**, all children, including those from immigrant families, are entitled to full-time ECEC from nine months of age, regardless of parental employment. Families with low incomes receive fee subsidies. ECEC provision includes multilingual support, including mother tongue instruction and Finnish/Swedish as second-language programmes. However, a home-care-allowance (HCA) is also available for families with children under the age of three who are not participating in municipal or private care. This option is widely used, particularly among immigrant families.

In **Iceland**, children do not have a legal right to a publicly subsidised ECEC place. Access, fees and support measures vary across municipalities. Fees are not income-based, though income-based discounts are available in many municipalities. Several municipalities provide cash-for-care benefits to parents of children aged 12-24 months who do not use publicly funded ECEC. These benefits may encourage families, particularly immigrant families, to care for children at home rather than enrol them in ECEC.

In **Denmark**, all children are entitled to a childcare place from six months of age (26 weeks). Parental fees are capped at 25% of gross operating costs, with additional income-based subsidies. To promote integration and language development, bilingual children from disadvantaged areas must attend 25 hours of ECEC per week from age one. ECEC provision includes language stimulation programmes.

In **Norway**, all children who turn one are entitled to publicly subsidised childcare from their local municipality if they have a permanent residence permit. Fees are equal and not adjusted by income. However, since 2015, a national subsidy ensures that low-income families pay no more than 6% of their income for a full-time place. Additional measures include a discount for the second sibling and free ECEC for the third sibling and upwards who attend ECEC at the same time, and 20 hours free core time per week for children aged two to five from low-income families. A cash-for-care (CFC) allowance is also available for children under age two (13 to 19 months) who are not in full-time ECEC, though parents must have at least five years of residence to qualify. Since 2012, CFC has been abolished for children above two. Children from asylum seeking families do not have the right to attend until their application has been accepted. However, they can attend if there is a place available in the kindergarten of their corresponding municipality. A government grant finances fulltime places for all children in asylum centres aged one to five regardless of the status of their asylum application.

...

In **Sweden,** children are guaranteed access to ECEC from age one, with municipalities required to provide a place within four months of application. ECEC is universally subsidised, with fees income-based and capped to ensure affordability. From ages three to six, children are entitled to 15 hours of free preschool per week. Universal provision has narrowed migrant participation gaps. The cash-for-care allowance was introduced in Sweden in 2008 and abolished in 2016 as it was almost exclusively used by migrant mothers, for whom the support represented a source of income, but also a disincentive to invest – through enrolment in ECEC – in the long-run integration outcomes of themselves and their children. Language support is available for non-Swedish-speaking families. A proposal is under consideration to make preschool compulsory for children with limited exposure to Swedish, to strengthen language development and promote equal opportunities.

Source: Collischon, Kuehnle and Oberfichtner (2024[21]), Gruber, Kosonen and Huttunen (2023[22]), OECD (2024[19]), OECD (2024[10]), OECD (2022[9]), OECD (2018[8]), OECD (2016[7]), Tronstad et al. (2025[23]).

III Social integration

Key takeaways

- In most Nordic countries, fewer than 25% of migrants live in relative poverty. While these figures are relatively low in international comparison, they exceed the rates among the native-born by at least 5 p.p. Furthermore, many migrants are overburdened by housing costs, but few live in substandard housing.
- The share of immigrants who identify as members of a discriminated group ranges from 10% to 14% in the Nordic countries, similar to the EU total. Among young people, the share of those affected by discrimination is higher among the native-born with immigrant parents than among those who have immigrated themselves. However, children who have immigrated themselves frequently feel awkward and out of place at school.
- With the exception of Denmark, more than 60% of migrants residing in a Nordic country for at least ten years have acquired their host country's nationality. Take-up of nationality is particularly high among non-EU born immigrants.

III.1. Poverty and housing

Immigrants tend to have lower levels of income than the native-born population in most countries. In the EU, the incomes of the foreign-born are around 14% lower those of their native-born peers. Income disparities in the Nordic countries tend to be similar, ranging from 11% to 15%. The exception is Sweden, where a larger proportion of humanitarian migrants contributes to a larger income disparity and immigrants' income falling 24% below that of their native-born counterparts. A similar disparity is observed in other major destinations with many non-EU born migrants (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany and the Netherlands).

The share of immigrants living in relative poverty (i.e. with an income below 60% of the median income) is relatively low in international comparison (see **Figure 15**). The strong safety nets in Nordic countries keep poverty low relative to other OECD and EU countries. Rates are lowest in Iceland, Finland and Norway, where fewer than one in five immigrants live below the poverty line (16%, 18% and 19%, respectively). Together with Ireland, these are the lowest figures in the comparison group. In Denmark, about one in four immigrants is considered poor (24%), while in Sweden, the rate rises to 29%, which is slightly above the EU total (28%). Additionally, the gap between non-EU born immigrants and their host-country peers is widest in Sweden, where non-EU born immigrants are almost three times more likely than the native-born to be poor (34% and 12%, respectively).

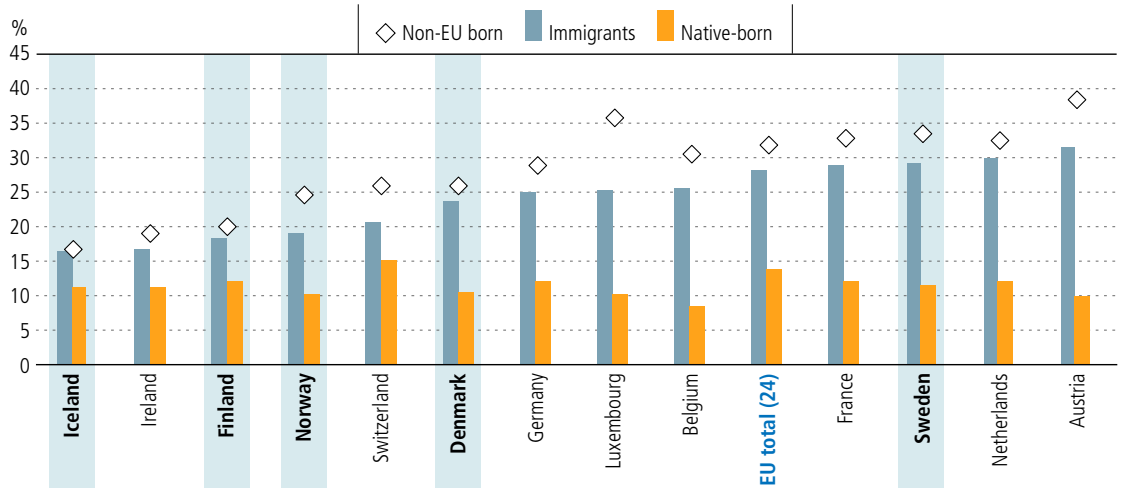
The higher poverty levels among non-EU born immigrants are explained by the lower employment rates of this population. Sweden and, more recently, Norway host a large share of humanitarian migrants. Indeed, it is estimated that half of the non-EEA immigrants residing in Norway and Sweden originally arrived as refugees or as family members of refugees. These humanitarian migrants, generally have low levels of education and struggle more to find a job in the host country. This challenge is particularly acute in the Nordic countries, where demand of low-skilled labour is relatively limited. By contrast, in Finland and Iceland, where humanitarian flows

are more recent, or most migrants come from the European Economic Area, poverty gaps between groups are narrow (ratio around 1.5). Poverty rates among immigrants have also evolved differently across the Nordic countries. While they have decreased in Finland, Iceland and Denmark (by up to 13 p.p.) over the past decade; they have increased in Norway and Sweden (+1 p.p. and +5 p.p., respectively), where large inflows of asylum seekers arrived in recent years.

Figure 15

Poverty rates among immigrants vary across Nordic countries

Relative poverty rates, ages 16 and above, 2023 or most recent year available



Note: Data for Iceland is for 2018.Countries are sorted in ascending order of poverty rates among immigrants.

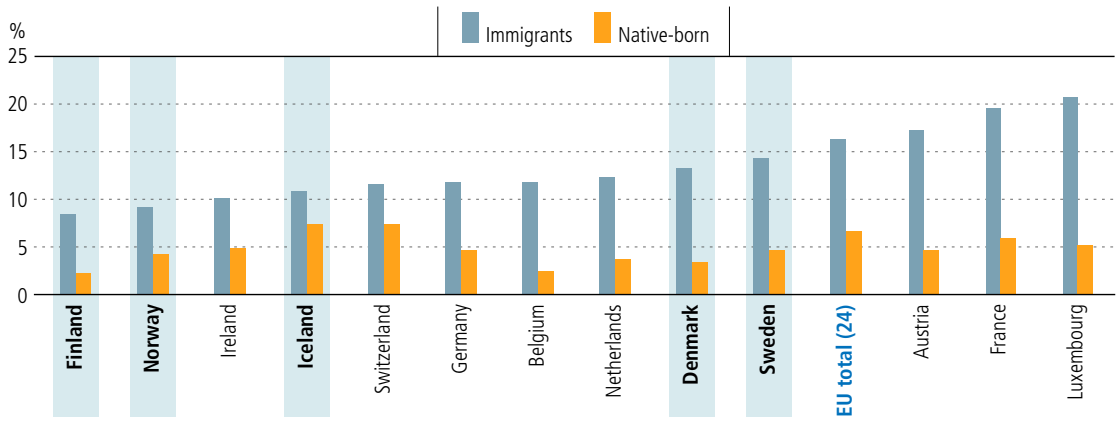
Source: European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) 2023; Switzerland: EU-SILC 2022.

While lower employment rates go some way towards explaining the higher poverty rates seen among immigrants in Nordic countries, even within the employed population, poverty rates are considerably higher among migrants than among the native-born. This is particularly true in Denmark and Finland. In both countries, employed immigrants are about four times more likely to be affected by relative poverty than their native-born peers (see **Figure 16**).

Figure 16

In-work poverty rates are lower than in other countries, but immigrants are two to four times more likely to be affected than the native-born

Relative poverty rates among employed individuals, ages 16 and above, 2023 or most recent year available



Note: Data for Iceland is for 2018.Countries are sorted in ascending order of poverty rates among immigrants.

Source: European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) 2023; Switzerland: EU-SILC 2022.

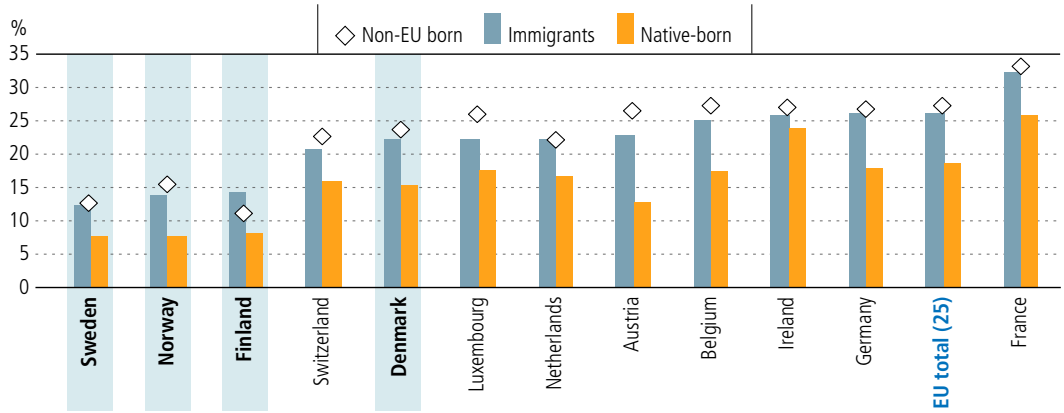
In the Nordic countries, as elsewhere in the OECD, immigrants are underrepresented among homeowners. Differences in home ownership between foreign- and native-born are up to 30 p.p. in Finland and Sweden. Gaps in ownership rates are lowest in Denmark (20 p.p.), where ownership rates are also comparatively low among the native-born.

Their high propensity to rent, and incur substantial housing costs, alongside their relatively more modest incomes, can mean that immigrants are at higher risk of being overburdened by housing costs (allocating more than 40% of their disposable income to rent), of living in overcrowded accommodation[5] and substandard housing[6]. Indeed, the share of immigrants considered to be overburdened by housing costs is above the EU total (13%) in most Nordic countries. The highest shares are observed in Sweden (26%) and Denmark (26%), followed by Finland (21%). Overcrowding rates among foreign-born are relatively high in Sweden (28%), especially among non-EU born immigrants (34%). On the other hand, few immigrants live in substandard housing in the Nordic countries (see **Figure 17**). Although, substandard housing affects more immigrants than native-born, the shares are low in international comparison, particularly in Finland, Norway and Sweden (up to 14% compared with 27% EU-wide).

Figure 17

Few migrants in the Nordic countries live in substandard housing

Persons living in substandard housing, ages 16 and above, 2023



Note: Data for Iceland is not available for 2023. Countries are sorted in ascending order of substandard housing rates among immigrants.

Source: European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) 2023; Switzerland: EU-SILC 2022.

III.2. Discrimination

Discrimination can be an important obstacle to the integration of immigrants – both into the labour market and society. The share of immigrants in the Nordic countries who report belonging to a group that is discriminated against on the grounds of nationality, ethnicity or race is around the EU total, but lower than that of most longstanding European destinations (see **Figure 18**). Similarly, the share of immigrants who identify as a member of a discriminated group is also below or close to the EU total (13%), ranging between 10% in Finland and 14% in Iceland. This places the Nordic countries behind Belgium, Austria, the Netherlands and France, where the perceived discrimination rate exceeds 15%. Across EU countries, perceived discrimination is more common among immigrants born outside Europe than among their counterparts born in Europe.

Over the past decade, perceived discrimination among immigrants has increased moderately in Iceland and Norway (by 5 p.p. and 3 p.p., respectively); it remained unchanged in Finland and Sweden; and decreased in Denmark (by 2 p.p.), according to data from the European Social Survey (ESS) 2002-2012. The stability or modest increase in perceived discrimination in countries that received large inflows of migrants during this period may reflect the influence of strong anti-discrimination laws and policies implemented in these countries (see **Box 7**).

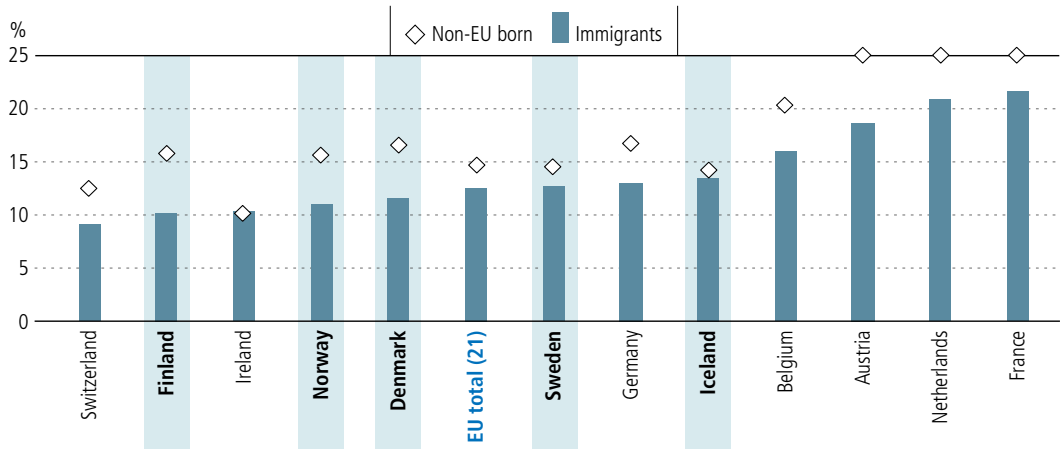
5. A home is considered overcrowded if the number of rooms is less than the sum of one living room, plus one room for each single person or the couple responsible for the household, plus one room for every two additional adults, plus one room for every two children.

6. Accommodation is considered substandard if, for example, it is too dark, does not provide exclusive access to a bathroom, or if the roof leaks.

Figure 18

The share of migrants who report belonging to a discriminated group is lower than in most long-standing European destinations

Self-reported discrimination, ages 15-64, 2012-2023



Note: Countries are sorted in ascending order of perception of discrimination among immigrants. Denmark data is only available for three rounds of the ESS with 2018 being the most recent round.

Source: European Social Survey (ESS) 2012-2023.

Yet discrimination is hard to measure. And, even if it is not strongly perceived by immigrants themselves it can have a pernicious impact, particularly in the labour and rental housing markets. Evidence from field experiments in Denmark, Finland and Norway shows that discrimination is prevalent in the labour and housing markets. These studies show that job applicants with "immigrant-sounding" names must send up to two times as many applications than candidates with Nordic names and equivalent qualifications before being invited for a job interview (Dahl and Krog, 2018[24]; Ahmad, 2020[25]; Larsen and Di Stasio, 2019[26]). Similarly, in Iceland, results from an experimental study show that individuals with Polish names are less likely to receive an answer to their rental inquiry than their native-born counterparts (Björnsson, Kopsch and Zoega, 2018[27]).

Among young people aged between 15 and 34, the share of those who feel they belong to a discriminated group is higher than the EU average (12%) in all Nordic countries. At 18% the share is particularly high in Norway and Finland, a figure surpassed only by France (22%) and the Netherlands (28%). Furthermore, self-reported discrimination is higher among native-born with immigrant parents than among those who immigrated themselves in Denmark and Norway (by 4 p.p. and 3 p.p., respectively).

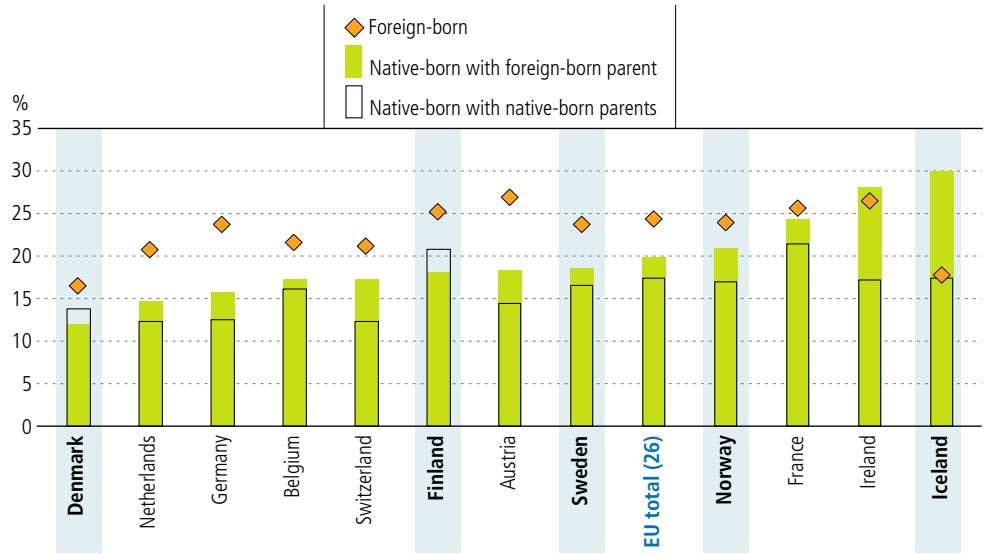
In addition, in three out of five Nordic countries, native-born 15-year-old pupils with migrant parents are more likely to report feeling awkward and out of place at school than their peers with native-born parents (see **Figure 19**). Group differences are largest in Iceland (13 p.p.), where immigration is a relatively recent phenomenon, followed by Norway and Sweden, where the gap is much narrower (4 p.p. and 2 p.p., respectively). By contrast, in Denmark and Finland, a sense of not belonging at school is more common among native-born pupils with native-born parents than among their peers with immigrant parents (-2 p.p. and -3 p.p., respectively).

However, the share of pupils who feel awkward and out of place at school is generally more widespread among foreign-born pupils who arrived as children to the host country. In the Nordic countries, this is especially true in Finland, Norway, and Sweden, where around one in four foreign-born pupils report such a feeling (25%, 24% and 24%, respectively). In Denmark, too, foreign-born pupils are most likely to report this feeling, but the share is lower (17%). In Iceland, however, foreign-born pupils are as likely as their native-born peers with native-born parents to report a sense of not belonging at school (18%) and less likely than their native-born peers with foreign-born parents (30%). Stronger perceptions of discrimination among young native-born individuals are observed in other OECD countries (OECD/European Commission, 2023[1]). This may be partly due to better knowledge of individual rights and greater awareness of discriminatory practices.

Figure 19

Many native-born pupils with migrant parents feel awkward or out of place in their school

Share of pupils who feel awkward or out of place in their school, ages 15-16, 2022



Note: Countries are sorted in ascending order of sense of belonging among native-born with foreign-born parents. Figures refer to percentage of all students responding "Agree" or "Strongly Agree".

Source: OECD, PISA 2022 Database.

Box 7 Actions to tackle discrimination in the Nordic countries

Across the Nordic countries, recent anti-discrimination efforts have been implemented to address evolving needs and strengthen targeted actions. Nordic Governments are increasingly combatting specific forms of racism – such as anti-Muslim, anti-Black and antisemitic discrimination. A strong emphasis is placed on youth engagement, education, working conditions and digital interactions. These initiatives are often supported by civil society partnerships, legal frameworks that mandate proactive equality measures, and they are regularly monitored.

Denmark adopted in 2003 the Danish Act on Ethnic Equal Treatment, its first legislative measure to combat ethnic discrimination. In 2025, it launched its first national action plan to fight racism, including 36 initiatives aimed at reducing racial discrimination and strengthening civil society engagement. This plan includes, among other things, targeted measures for youth education, labour market inclusion and digital hate speech.

Finland has in place the Non-Discrimination Act to prevent discrimination in all its forms since 2015. Most recently, in 2024, it launched a new action plan to combat racism and promote a more inclusive society. This action includes the "Actions, Not Only Words" campaign, which aims at addressing racism and promoting commitments from partners, including trade unions and civil society to combat racism in organisational culture and to advocate for non-discrimination in operations.

Iceland took important steps towards improving anti-discrimination legislation for immigrants in the late 2010s. In 2018, the Act on Equal Treatment of Individuals Regardless of Race and Ethnic Origin and the Act on Equal Treatment on the Labour Market were both adopted by parliament. Furthermore, in 2019, anti-discrimination was firmly put on the government's agenda when it was transferred under the responsibility of the Prime Minister's Office in order to promote and streamline equality issues within public policy.

...

Norway has various Action Plans against immigrant discrimination, which have been in place since 1992. In 2018, The Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act came into force to combat discrimination and encourage diversity. Under this Act, the government established an Equality and Anti-Discrimination Tribunal, a complaints body that makes final, legally binding decisions on harassment and discrimination. In recent years, new measures have been put in place to operationalise the 2018 Act. These include the 2024-2027 National Action Plan and the 2025-2030 Anti-Muslim Racism Plan.

Sweden has a long experience in anti-discrimination legislation. The 2008 Discrimination Act has been amended multiple times. The most recent changes took place in 2024 and the Action Plan Against Racism and Hate Crime was adopted. This initiative focuses on actions that are targeted to tackle anti-Muslim racism, antisemitism, anti-Black racism and other forms of racism. It has four focus areas including schools and working life.

Source: European Commission (2025[28]), European Commission (2024[29]), OECD (2024[10]), Government of Iceland (2025[30]), OECD (2022[9]), Norwegian Ministry of Culture and Equality (2024[31]), Government Offices of Sweden (2024[32]).

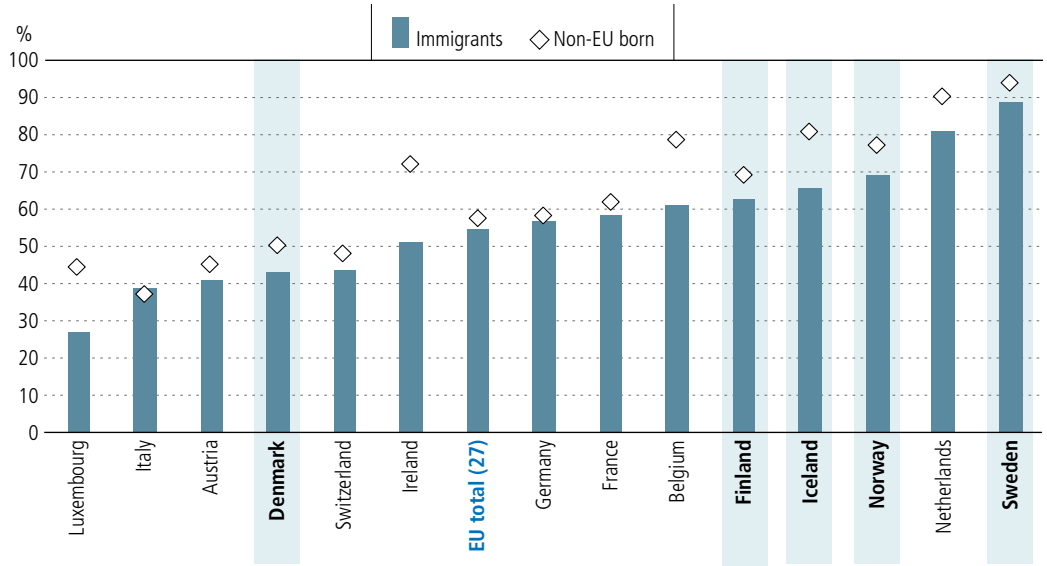
III.3. Political and societal participation

In 2023, the share of settled immigrants (those with more than ten years of residence) with host-country citizenship was over 60% in most Nordic countries (see **Figure 20**). This puts the Nordic countries at the higher end of the distribution within the comparison group. Shares were highest in Sweden (88%) and Norway (69%), and lowest in Denmark (43%). The benefit of acquiring host-country nationality differs by region of origin. Take-up of nationality is thus higher among non-EU born settled migrants than for their EU-born counterparts in all Nordic countries. In Sweden, more than 90% of non-EU born have acquired the Swedish nationality. The high rates in Sweden, Norway and Iceland are explained by the less strict requirements to acquire citizenship (e.g. criteria for language proficiency). Meanwhile, the share of immigrants who take up the nationality of their host country is significantly lower among those born in the EU – in most Nordic countries by around 20 p.p. compared to those born outside the EU. The gap is particularly large in Norway, at over 40 p.p.

Figure 20

Take-up of nationality is high in most Nordic countries

Host-country nationals among immigrants with at least 10 years of residence, ages 15 and above, 2023



Note: Countries are sorted in ascending order of acquisition of nationality among all immigrants.

Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

Over the past years, the trends in citizenship acquisition have differed across the Nordic countries. Between 2010 and 2023, the take-up decreased in Denmark (-14 p.p.), Finland (-9 p.p.) and Norway (-2 p.p.) and increased in Iceland (+10 p.p.) and Sweden (+4 p.p.). The decreasing trends are expected to continue due to new stricter regulations for naturalisation. For example, in Norway the requirement of residence has been raised from 7 of the last 10 years to 8 of the last 11 years and the requirement for knowledge of oral Norwegian is planned to raise from level A2 to level B1. In Finland, since October 2024, the required period of residence for Finnish citizenship has been lengthened from five to eight years, while the time living in Finland when applying for international protection no longer counts toward the residence requirements. Alongside this, the definition of sufficient financial resources is to be tightened, and the introduction of a citizenship test is under consideration. In Sweden, a proposal to tighten the requirements for acquiring citizenship has also been made. This includes extending the minimum residence period from five to eight years, introducing stricter rules regarding behaviour and lifestyle and raising language requirements. The changes are proposed to come into force in June 2026.

IV Vulnerable groups

Key takeaways

- In the context of large linguistic disparities, native-born children with migrant parents face significant challenges in integrating into the school system and lag behind their peers with native-born parents. Their PISA reading scores are at least 40 points lower – a performance gap above the EU total of 31 points. They also face greater challenges in the transition from school to work, with a higher probability of being NEET (not in employment, formal education, nor training) and often have lower employment rates.
- While many humanitarian migrants have a low level of education, more than one in four continue their education in the Nordic countries by actively participating in adult education and training. Furthermore, humanitarian migrants perform well in the labour market, particularly as their duration of stay increases, reaching employment rates of 60% or higher.

IV.1. Young migrants and children with migrant parents

Proficiency of the host-country language plays an important role in school performance, particularly in reading. Indeed, as elsewhere in the OECD, foreign-born pupils tend to underperform their native-born peers in the Nordic countries. The disparities, however, are particularly large in the Nordic countries (see **Figure 21**), where the linguistic distance between the language spoken in the host country and those spoken by immigrants is among the largest in the OECD (OECD, 2018[33]).

The reading scores of native-born pupils with foreign-born parents are also below those of their peers with native-born parents in the Nordic countries. Even in Norway, where reading disparities are the smallest in the Nordics (40 points), the gap is 9 points larger than that observed in the EU. In Finland, where, at 62 points, the disparity in reading skills is the largest, it is about the size of the typical test-score gap observed in high-income countries between students who are three schooling years apart.[7] A similar pattern is observed in virtually all comparison countries, where native-born children of immigrants lag behind their peers with native-born parents.

Native-born pupils with foreign-born parents tend to have a higher performance than their foreign-born peers in Sweden, Finland and Norway (gaps of 41 points, 28 points and 14 points, respectively). However, in Denmark and Iceland, the opposite is observed: native-born pupils with immigrant parents lag behind 15-year-olds born abroad (-8 points and -18 points, respectively).

Linguistic distance between the language spoken at school and the mother tongue of migrant groups can also play a role in the literacy of the children of migrants – particularly when children have limited contact with their host country peers in their early years. In Iceland, for example, the difference in PISA reading scores among foreign-born pupils who speak Icelandic at home and those who do not amounts to 81 points – the largest difference in the OECD. For those born in their host country, language proficiency and development taught at an early age can have profound implications for future learning.

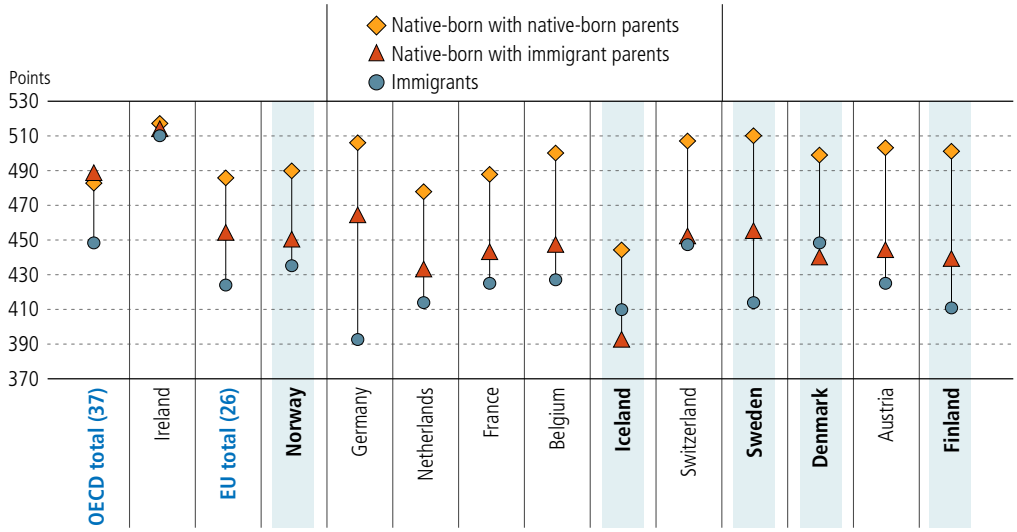
7. Revised PISA guidance suggests that the learning gains of one year of schoolings are estimated to be equivalent to a reading-score difference of 20 points (Avvisati and Givord, 2023[49]).

Evidence from PISA suggests that the age at which children first enrol in ECEC influences their future performance in school even after accounting for socio-economic background. Children with foreign-born parents who joined ECEC at the age of four score lower than their peers who joined ECEC at three years old or younger. ECEC uptake among children aged three to five is high in the Nordic countries and it has been increasing over time. Furthermore, the gap in ECEC uptake between foreign- and native-born children has narrowed, particularly in Norway. The positive results of native-born pupils with immigrant parents compared with their foreign-born counterparts in Sweden, Finland and Norway suggests that children of immigrants have benefited from the comprehensive integration measures, including the universal expansion of early childhood education and care (OECD, 2022[9]).

Figure 21

Disparities in reading scores are large

Mean PISA reading scores, ages 15-16, 2022



Note: Countries are sorted in ascending order of the gap between native-born with immigrant parents and native-born with native-born parents. Caution is required when interpreting estimates for Denmark and the Netherlands, because one or more PISA sampling standards were not met (see (OECD, 2023) for more information).

Source: OECD, PISA 2022 Database.

The educational outcomes of native-born youth with immigrant parents are an indicator of long-term integration. In the Nordic countries, this group tends to underperform compared with their peers with native-born parents, as it is the case in most comparison countries. According to data from Nordic Statistics for 2021, native-born youth with foreign-born parents are overrepresented among those with a lower level of education, especially in Finland (by 11 p.p.), Denmark (10 p.p.) and Norway (5 p.p.). And, in some Nordic countries they are also underrepresented in higher education, particularly in Finland (by 12 p.p.). Over the past decade, there has been a positive trend in the share of highly educated, particularly among native-born with foreign-born parents. This increase has been pronounced in Denmark and Norway (16 p.p.). The exception is Finland, where the share of highly educated native-born with immigrant parents declined over the same period (6 p.p.).

Another key indicator of successful integration policy is intergenerational educational mobility – the share of young people whose educational attainment exceeds that of their low- or medium-educated parents. Despite the positive trend in the share of young people obtaining a higher education degree, intergenerational education mobility among the native-born with immigrant parents is low in the Nordic countries, compared with that of other major destinations. However, patterns vary across countries and by parental origin. Among the Nordic countries with available data, intergenerational mobility among the native-born with immigrant parents is highest in Sweden (47%), followed by Norway (36%), and lowest in Finland (10%). In Sweden, upward mobility is higher among children with foreign-born parents than among their peers with native born parents.

In Norway, rates are similar across native-born youth (34%). By contrast, in Finland, mobility is considerably lower among children of immigrants than among their peers with native-born parents (31%). These differences are partly driven by the educational composition of parents across countries: foreign-born parents are concentrated in lower education groups (especially in Sweden), while native-born parents are more likely to be in the higher ones. As a result, children of native-born parents have fewer opportunities for upward mobility, whereas children of immigrants have more room for improvement, though they face greater challenges.

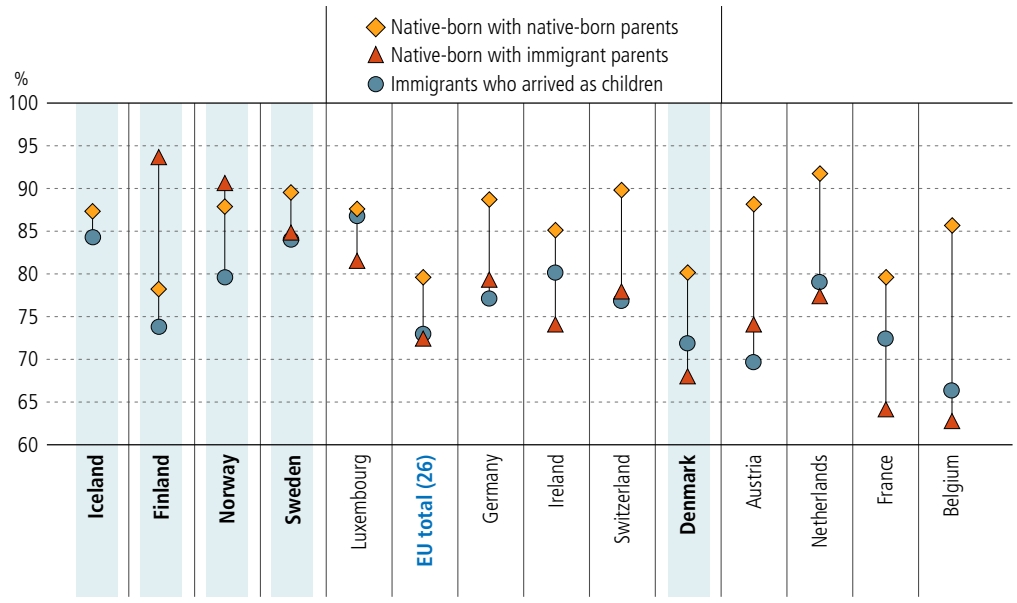
Young people with migrant parents tend to struggle more in making the transition from school to work than their counterparts with native-born parents. The obstacles they face include difficulties in school, discrimination in the labour market, lack of social networks, among others. In the majority of OECD countries, employment rates among native-born youth with immigrant parents tend to be lower than among their peers with native-born parents. With the exception of Denmark, this pattern is more muted in the Nordic countries than in the comparison countries (see **Figure 22**). Indeed, in Finland and Norway youth with immigrant parents outperform their peers with native-born parents seeing employment rates, at 90%, that are the highest among the comparison countries.

Foreign-born who arrived in the Nordic countries as children generally have the lowest employment rates as young adults, ranging from 72% in Denmark to 84% in Sweden and Iceland. Only in Denmark do foreign-born achieve employment rates exceeding those of native-born with migrant parents (by 4 p.p.).

Figure 22

In some Nordic countries, native-born youth with immigrant parents are employed at lower rates than their peers with native-born parents

Youth employment rates, ages 15-34, 2023



Note: Countries are sorted in ascending order of the gap between native-born with immigrant parents and native-born with native-born parents. There is no data available for native-born youth with immigrant parents in Iceland.

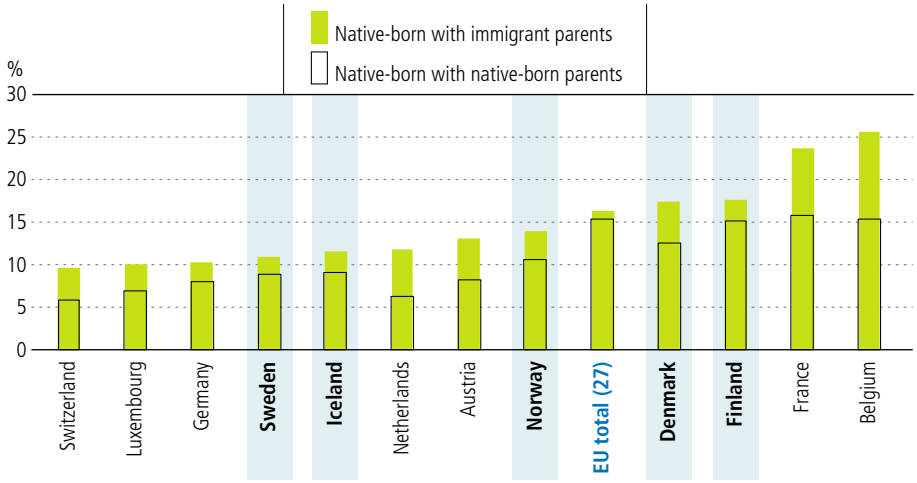
Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

Relatedly, in the Nordic countries, as elsewhere, native-born youth with migrant parents are also more likely to be neither in employment, education nor training (NEET) than their peers with native-born parents (see **Figure 23**). However, in the context of a strong culture of training, lifelong learning and second chances (see **Box 8**), the differences are not large in international comparison. Differences in NEET rates by parental origin are widest in Denmark (5 p.p.) and narrowest in Sweden (2 p.p.). In Iceland, Norway and Finland, the gap between native-born with native-born and migrant parents amounts to 3 p.p.

Figure 23

NEET rates of native-born youth with migrant parents are higher than for those with native-born parents

NEET rates (not in employment, formal education, nor training), ages 15-34, 2021 or most recent year available



Note: Data for Iceland cover the population aged 16-24. Countries are sorted in ascending order of NEET rates among native-born with immigrant parents.

Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2021. Austria and Germany: Mikrocensus 2020. Belgium, France, Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland: National LFS 2020. Denmark, Finland and Norway: Population register 2020. Iceland: Gylfadóttir (2021), NEET-hópurinn: Staða og bakgrunnur ungmenna af erlendum uppruna utan vinnumarkaðar og skóla, Varða, https://www.rannvinn.is/_files/ugd/61b738_2707f7b72f794d19a7e60045fe3bc18a.pdf.

Box 8 **Swedish Integration policies for young people**

Integration policies in the school system are shaped by central government guidelines, primarily through the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket), but there is a significant degree of local autonomy. Implementation is largely decentralized, with municipalities playing a key role. Current measures include:

Rapid integration: All children arriving in Sweden, accompanied or otherwise, should be offered access to education no less than 30 days after their arrival.

Skill mapping: A skill mapping assessment forms the basis of decisions regarding which grade the newly-arrived student should be placed, and how teaching and instruction should be planned. This compulsory mapping must be completed within two months of arrival.

Preparatory classes: In their first year of compulsory school, newly-arrived migrants may be offered preparatory classes to provide them with support prior to entering mainstream education; the decision regarding the provision of such classes rests with the individual head teacher. Students are placed in regular classes alongside preparatory education where possible. Preparatory classes should not last for longer than two years. This means that when a child is able to attend, for example, a physical education class alongside their native-born peers, they will be integrated into this class even while they may remain in preparatory classes for mathematics instruction.

...

Introductory programmes: Upon reaching the end of compulsory schooling, those students who do not qualify for upper-secondary can undertake introductory programmes. These programmes, open to both native- and foreign-born students, include:

- **Preparatory education** enables students to undertake minor completions necessary for eligibility to higher education preparatory courses.
- **Programme-oriented individual options** are open to students who aim to achieve eligibility to upper-secondary courses but require more than minor completions.
- **Vocational introduction** is designed to equip students to enter the labour market or eventually to lead to studies in a vocational programme.
- **Individual alternative targets** youth who have large skill gaps or weak motivation.
- **Language introduction** targets the foreign-born whose language skills are impeding their educational progress.

Specific Provisions for Individuals Fleeing Ukraine

Individuals who have been granted temporary protection under the Temporary Protection Directive are entitled to education, though they are not subject to compulsory schooling. This provision grants them the same access to educational opportunities as other asylum-seeking children and young people, including pre-school, compulsory school and introductory programmes at the upper-secondary level.

Source: OECD (2016[7]), Swedish National Agency for Education (2025[35]).

IV.2. Humanitarian migrants

Over the past decade, the Nordic countries have seen significant shifts in humanitarian inflows, with a peak in asylum applications in 2015-2016. In Sweden, this surge represented the highest per capita inflow of asylum seekers ever recorded in an OECD country. While other Nordic countries saw more moderate increases, Sweden's exceptionally high intake led to policy changes and a gradual decline in applications across the region after 2017. In 2022, asylum requests surged again. However, in 2023, most Nordic countries reported declines in new asylum requests, while Norway saw a slight increase. Comparable information on the labour market outcomes of humanitarian migrants in the EU/EFTA is only available from the EU Labour Force Survey, which collects information on humanitarian migrants based on their self-reported reason for migrating.[8] However, it does not yet fully capture individuals fleeing Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Their initial labour market integration outcomes are discussed in **Box 9**.

8. Consequently, the data may include both recognised refugees and asylum seekers (i.e. persons who have applied but have not yet been granted formal refugee status). Nevertheless, the coverage of asylum seekers is likely to be limited, as they often live in shared accommodation and are therefore not included in the survey. For simplicity, persons who state that they migrated for "international protection or asylum" are collectively referred to as "humanitarian migrants" in this section. Persons who were born in an EU or EFTA country and who have stated that they migrated for international protection reasons are excluded from the analysis.

Box 9 **Labour market integration of beneficiaries of temporary protection from Ukraine**

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has triggered the largest displacement of people in Europe since World War II. In response, EU member states have taken rapid legislative measures to activate temporary protection at national level and provide immediate support to refugees from Ukraine. As of July 2025, there were 4.34 million non-EU citizens under temporary protection, 98% Ukrainians. While Finland and Sweden have activated temporary protection for persons fleeing Ukraine, Denmark, Iceland and Norway are not bound by the Temporary Protection Directive but have introduced similar national protection provisions. Collectively, as of July 2025, the Nordic countries have received over 240 000 Ukrainian beneficiaries with the largest numbers in Finland (75 000) and Norway (82 000). These arrivals represent a significant increase relative to the usual migration flows in the region and have required rapid adaptation of national protection and integration systems.

All Nordic countries introduced measures to support Ukrainians and facilitate their integration. Finland extended temporary protection until March 2027 and launched a comprehensive 2024-2027 action plan, including faster recognition of qualifications, enhanced language training, and better access to employment information and services. Norway implemented temporary legislative changes until July 2026 to ease settlement, reduce language and introduction programme requirements, and ensure rapid participation in municipal integration activities. Sweden expanded access to temporary protection, simplified registration for social services, and increased opportunities for language courses and municipal support. Denmark granted temporary residence permits under the Special Act on displaced persons, extended until March 2026, and prioritised labour market support for job seekers. Iceland provided social services, housing, and work permits under its humanitarian protection framework, streamlining procedures for Ukrainian arrivals.

Labour market integration of BTPs has improved steadily across the Nordic countries. In Finland, about 7 200 of 30 000 working-age Ukrainians were employed in April 2024, most of them as cleaners or in agricultural and forestry work. In Norway, roughly 31% of arrivals from 2022-2024 were employed by the end of 2024, many in sales and service jobs. In Sweden, labour market participation rose from 58% in 2023 to 66% in 2024, alongside increasing Swedish language proficiency. In Denmark, 59% of working-age Ukrainians were employed by May 2025, and most non-employed were actively seeking work. In Iceland, around 42% of Ukrainian refugees were employed in 2023. Overall, employment rates are rising as BTPs spend more time in the Nordic countries, supported by early labour market access, language training and targeted integration policies.

Source: UNHCR (2025[36]), Finnish Government (2024[37]), Finnish Immigration Service (2025[38]), Tronstad et al. (2025[23]), Nordic Welfare Centre (2025[39]), VATT Datahuone (2024[40]), Statistics Norway (2025[41]), Swedish Ministry of Justice (2024[42]), Integrationsbarometer (2025[43]), Directorate of Labour (2023[44]).

More than half of humanitarian migrants in the Nordic countries have lived in their host country for over ten years. Denmark has a particularly high proportion of settled humanitarian immigrants. At almost 70%, this share is similar to that in Switzerland (73%), but considerably higher than in other comparison countries, such as Ireland (22%), Germany (28%) and the Netherlands (38%). Only around 10% of humanitarian migrants in Norway, Finland and Sweden have lived in their host country for fewer than five years. In Denmark, this proportion is even lower, standing at just 4% – the lowest in the comparison group. As in many major destinations, most humanitarian migrants in the Nordic countries are men (60-70%). Ireland, Luxembourg and France are the only countries where the gender ratio is more balanced.

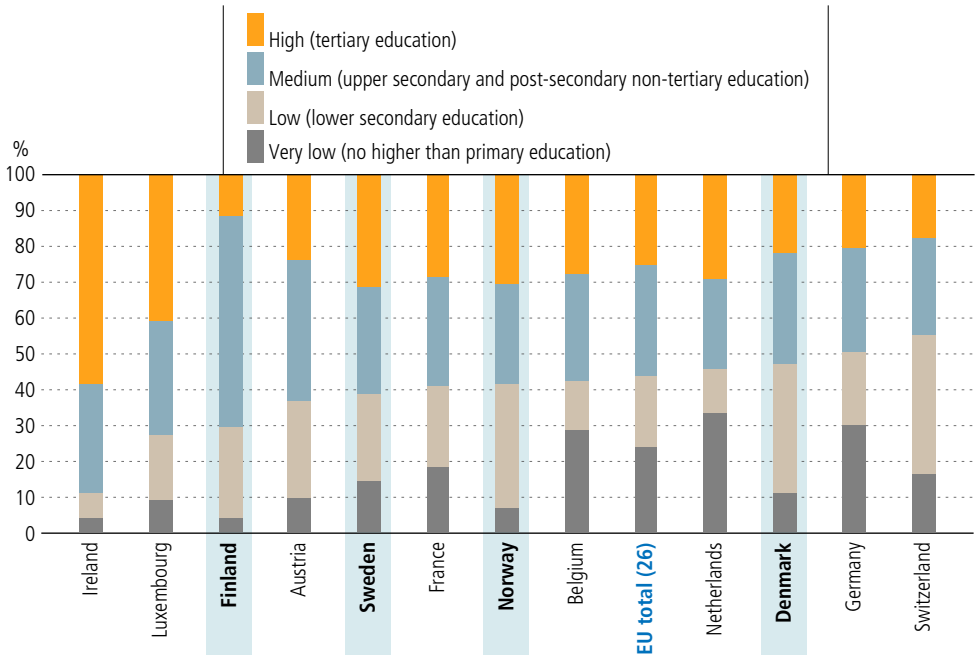
Around two in five humanitarian migrants in Denmark, Norway and Sweden live in densely populated areas. In Finland, this figure rises to three in four, which is higher than in any other comparison country.

In the Nordic countries, more than one in four humanitarian migrants has completed, at most, lower secondary education. Finland has the lowest proportion of humanitarian migrants with very low or low education (29%), followed by Sweden (39%) and Norway (42%), both of which have notably higher shares, but which are still below the EU total (44%) (see **Figure 24**). Denmark has the highest proportion of low-educated, at almost 50%, surpassed only by Germany and Switzerland. Meanwhile, a sizeable share of humanitarian migrants in Norway and Sweden have completed tertiary education (around 30%). The proportion of highly educated is somewhat lower in Denmark (21%) and Finland (12%). In all Nordic countries, the share of low-educated is higher among recent refugees (less than ten years of residence) than among settled refugees (ten or more years of residence), and vice versa for the share of highly educated. While this may reflect differences in the composition of humanitarian migrant cohorts, it could also indicate upskilling, suggesting that refugees continue their education after arriving in the host country.

Figure 24

More than one in four humanitarian migrants have completed at most lower secondary education

Educational attainment of humanitarian migrants, not in education, ages 15-64, 2023



Note: Countries are sorted in ascending order of the sum of very low and low-educated refugees.

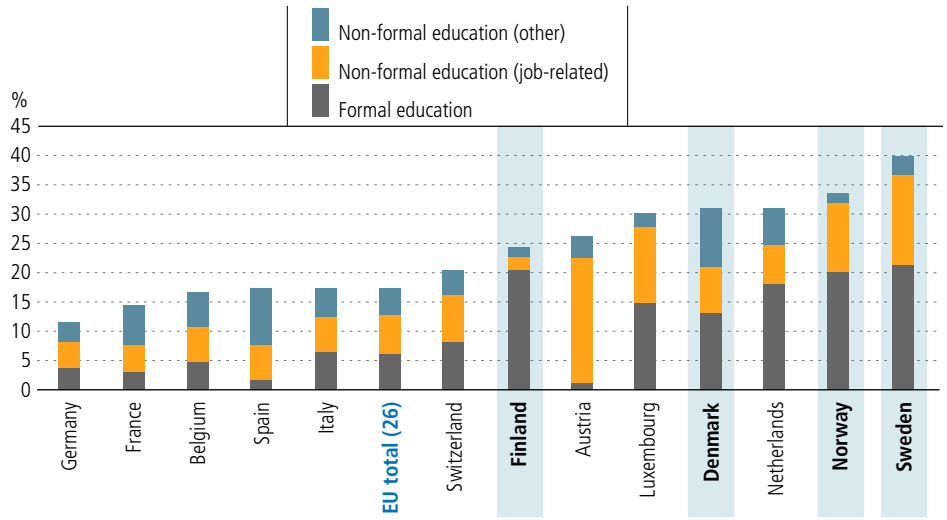
Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

At least one in four humanitarian migrants who arrived in the host country as an adult continues his or her education. The majority of humanitarian migrants of prime working age (25-54) report having participated in formal education in the four weeks prior to the survey (see **Figure 25**). Participation rates in formal education are highest in Finland, Norway and Sweden (20%) – the highest among major destinations. In Denmark, slightly fewer humanitarian migrants take part in formal learning activities (13%). However, a higher share of humanitarian migrants in Denmark participates in non-formal learning activities (18%). Participation rates in non-formal education are also high in Sweden and Norway (19% and 14%, respectively), particularly in job-related activities. Only Austria surpasses these rates, with 25% of humanitarian migrants engaging in non-formal adult education. As the length of stay increases, the participation rate in adult education and training decreases.

Figure 25

At least one in four humanitarian migrants in the Nordic countries continues their education

Self-reported participation of humanitarian migrants in adult education and training in the four weeks preceding the survey, among those who arrived as adults (age 20+), ages 25-54, 2023



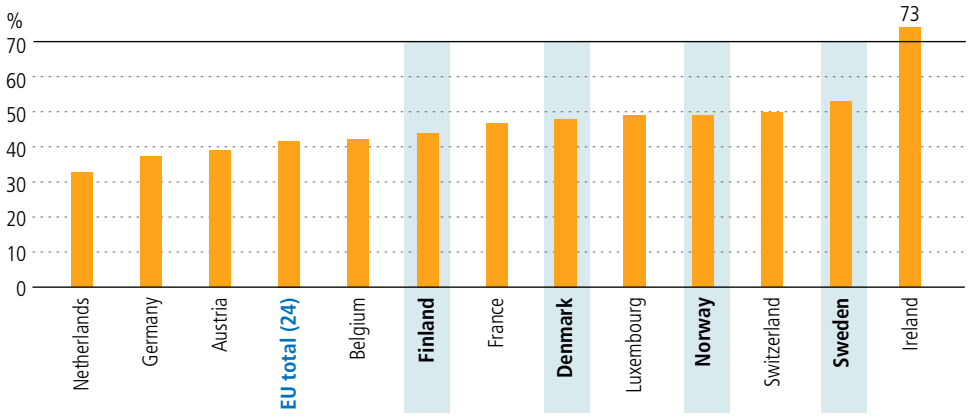
Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

In addition to high participation in further education, more than two-thirds of refugees in the Nordic countries attend language courses, a rate that is notably high in international comparison. This translates into good progress in learning the national language. Around half of humanitarian migrants achieve at least advanced proficiency after living in their host country for five years or more (see **Figure 26**). This progress is particularly notable in the context of the large linguistic differences between Nordic languages and the mother tongue of their migrant populations (OECD, 2018[33]). Sweden, where language learning is a foundational component of the obligatory introduction programme, shows particularly high language progress, with 53% of humanitarian migrants speaking fluently after living in Sweden for five years or more. Only Ireland – where the host country language is significantly more widely spoken across the globe – reports higher progress (73%). Although the language skills of humanitarian migrants in the other Nordic countries are slightly lower, they still exceed the EU total.

Figure 26

Around one in two humanitarian migrants speak the national language fluently after at least five years in the host country

Share of humanitarian migrants with at least self-reported advanced language proficiency after 5 years or more in the host country, excluding native speakers, ages 15-64, 2021



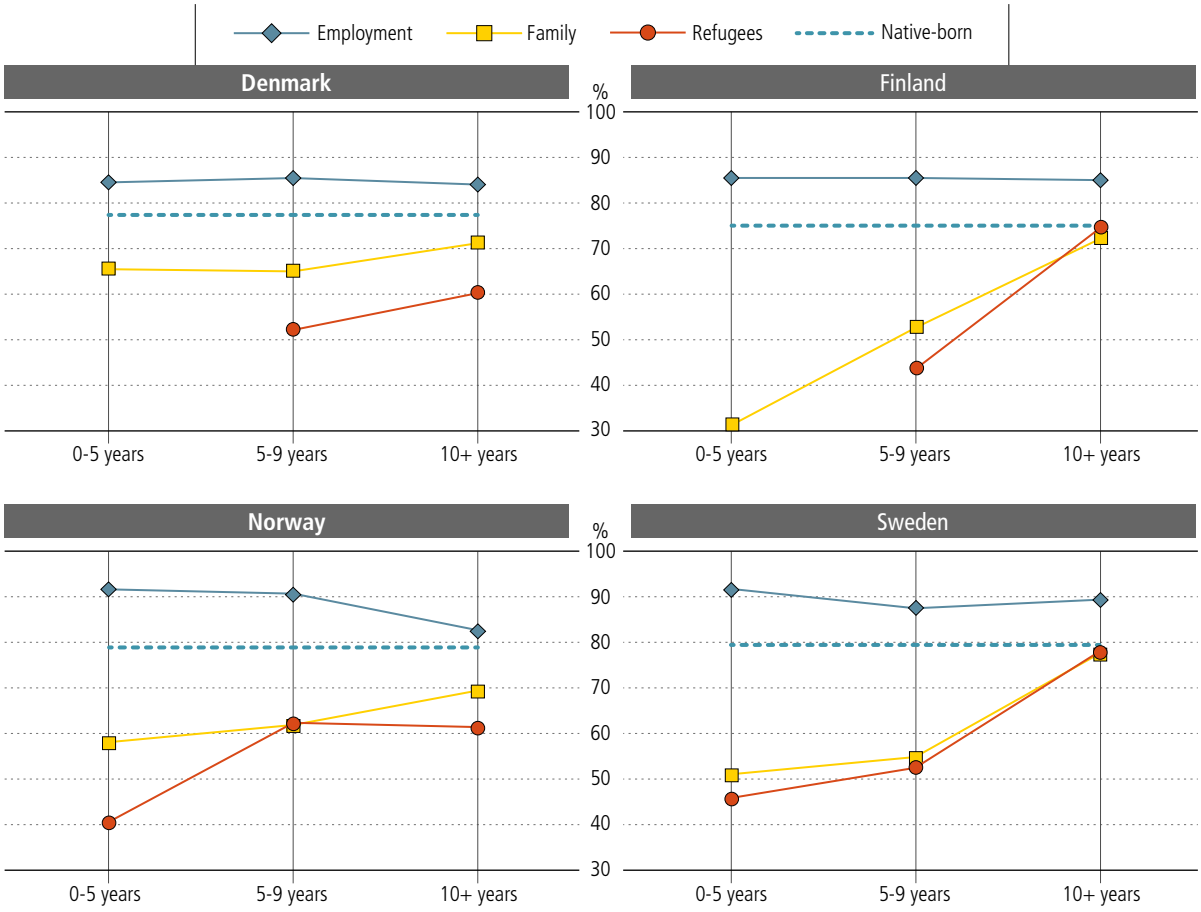
Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2021.

Humanitarian migrants in the Nordic countries strengthen their labour market attachment as their length of stay increases. Total employment rates for humanitarian migrants range from 56% in Finland to 66% in Sweden. This is higher than in many comparison countries. Only Switzerland and Luxembourg also have employment rates exceeding 60%. Generally, male humanitarian migrants are more likely to be employed than their female counterparts, with a difference of around 15 p.p. The only exception is Finland, where female humanitarian migrants have higher employment rates than male humanitarian migrants (60% compared to 54%). The employment rates of humanitarian migrants increase with the length of their stay (see **Figure 27**). While they are initially lower than those of labour and family migrants, they rise considerably over time and eventually even reach the level of the native-born in Finland and Sweden. However, the extent to which this is due to integration taking place over time or to the different composition of migration cohorts cannot be disentangled from this data. In Norway, the improvement in labour market outcomes appears to stall after 5 years of stay. Whether this is driven by compositional effects, or whether this results from the waning of integration efforts after the early years following integration cannot be disentangled from this data but warrants further investigation.

Figure 27

Employment rates of humanitarian migrants improve over time

Employment rates by reason for migration and years of residence in the Nordic countries, ages 15-64, 2023



Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

Conclusion

The Nordic countries have established a strong record of integrating immigrants, underpinned by comprehensive welfare systems, targeted active labour market policies and inclusive social institutions. Employment rates among immigrants are high by international standards and have risen markedly over the past decade, with Norway and Iceland standing out for particularly strong outcomes. Gender gaps in labour market participation are small, reflecting the broad inclusion of women in employment and the effectiveness, in most Nordic countries, of family and childcare policies in supporting work-life balance.

Participation in adult education and training is among the highest in the OECD, enabling migrants with limited skills to build the foundations necessary for integration, while supporting those with existing skills to upgrade and adapt their skills in line with the needs of Nordic labour markets. Despite the linguistic distance between Nordic languages and those of major migrant groups, progress on language acquisition has also been robust, except in Iceland, with many immigrants reporting fluency within a few years of arrival. These successes represent the fruits of sustained investment in migrant integration – across multiple domains – over the preceding decade.

Yet important challenges remain, and progress in several areas has been slow. Migrant women in the Nordic countries have high employment rates in international comparisons, but gaps remain between native-born and non-EU-born women, particularly in Sweden, where many humanitarian migrants face major hurdles to find work. In addition, migrant mothers, though comparatively active in the labour market, remain less likely than their native-born peers to use early childhood education and care (ECEC) services for children aged three to five in most Nordic countries, except Norway. This may limit their own career prospects and delay their children's exposure to the host-country language, with long-term implications for educational achievement.

Furthermore, highly educated migrants from outside the EU face persistent obstacles in translating their qualifications into appropriate employment. Despite relatively well-developed recognition procedures, overqualification rates are high and large gaps remain between foreign-born and native-born workers in access to high-skilled jobs, particularly in Norway and Iceland. This represents both a loss of individual potential and a missed opportunity for economies facing structural labour shortages.

The outcomes of the children of immigrants point to another area of concern. Across the Nordic countries, the academic performance of children with foreign-born parents lags behind that of their peers with native-born parents, particularly in reading. These gaps are among the largest in the OECD, particularly in Finland. Intergenerational educational mobility is limited, meaning that the disadvantages of immigrant parents are too often passed on to their children. While youth with migrant parents in Finland and Norway perform relatively well in the labour market, their NEET rates are higher than those of their peers with native-born parents, reflecting challenges in the school-to-work transition. Unless addressed, these disparities risk entrenching inequalities.

In terms of living conditions, immigrants in the Nordic countries generally experience lower rates of relative poverty compared to immigrants in other OECD and EU countries, thanks to strong social safety nets. Sweden, however, stands out with a higher poverty rate among immigrants and the largest disparity between non-EU born immigrants and native-born.

Finally, discrimination remains a significant barrier to labour market integration and social inclusion and young people with migrant parents report higher levels of discrimination than their peers in most other EU countries. While anti-discrimination frameworks in the Nordic region are among the most comprehensive in Europe, experimental evidence shows that biases in hiring and housing persist.

Investments in integration, across the Nordics, has delivered high employment rates, strong language acquisition, and relatively inclusive gender outcomes. However, continued efforts are needed to fully reap the yield of these investments: to combat discrimination; to reduce skills mismatch; and to ensure that disadvantage does not pass from one generation to the next. Addressing these challenges will be critical to ensuring that immigrants and their children can fully realise their potential, thereby contributing to dynamic, innovative, and cohesive Nordic societies in an era of demographic change and labour shortages.

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