

ADVICE, EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS

1. THE PROBLEM

Access to advice, education and training is an essential part of the socio-vocational integration process of asylum seekers. Newcomers arriving in a new country need basic information on the host society concerned, including information about how things work, 'do's and don'ts' and services available. Language training is essential in order to be able to go about everyday life and function independently. Vocational training can enhance existing skills and qualifications and bridge any gaps in the training or experience needed to find eventual employment.

Legal restrictions

Of all the disadvantaged groups under the EQUAL Community Initiative, asylum seekers are the least empowered, having no official status in the host country and only limited rights. In many EU Member States, asylum seekers have no or only restricted access to education and training. The Reception Directive encourages the access of asylum seekers to vocational training. Several Member States have lifted their earlier legal restrictions to such access, and are providing opportunities in mainstream education and training institutes or through the development of specific courses. Improvements are also being made to services aimed to inform asylum seekers on education and training possibilities, as well as their subsequent labour market integration. There are, however, still many asylum seekers in the EU who cannot take part in education and training.

Other restrictions

Having just arrived in the host society, asylum seekers do not often have easy access to information and as a result do not know where to find information on language courses and other educational and training opportunities. Counselling and mediation services aiming to assist jobseekers in their job search and develop their professional skills are not accessible to asylum seekers or not tailored to their specific needs. In many Member States, education and training programmes aiming to assist asylum seekers' integration into the labour market are not available. These missed opportunities and inconsistencies in the provision of advice, education and training for asylum seekers lead to dependence and as a result, to high costs to support and host asylum seekers.

The shortening of the application process in many countries has made it difficult for asylum seekers to take part in education and training activities that really make a difference. Organisations providing education and training have had to reduce the duration of their courses and change the content, prioritising what they considered to be key elements to the further integration or reintegration of their participants. Some opt for language skills, whilst others place major efforts on vocational development and practical experiences. These obstacles can be detrimental not only to asylum seekers' integration into the new society but also to their health and well-being. Education and training can offer opportunities to asylum seekers to not only gain useful and valuable skills, but also promote their human dignity as well as contributing to the host society.

2. POLICY RELEVANCE

2.1. THE EUROPEAN NATURE OF THE ISSUE

European projections¹ indicate that population growth in the EU until 2025 will be mainly due to net migration, as the total number of deaths will outnumber the total births from 2010. After 2025 the effects of net migration will cease to outweigh the natural decrease. This will have serious repercussions on the number of employed people in the EU given that the share of population of working age is expected to decrease strongly, from 67.4% in 2004 to 56.7% in 2050, a total fall of 52 million. The decline of the overall population is estimated to start by 2025 but the working population will already start its decrease already by 2011. Some Member States are already experiencing a decline in the working age population, such as Germany, Hungary and Latvia. The demographic trends will not affect all Member States to the same degree. Some sectors will also be more affected than others. However, there is overall consensus within the EU that these trends should be addressed in a coordinated and effective way.

Although the number of asylum seekers is relatively low in relation to the total EU workforce, many of those requesting protection are often qualified workers with skills that could bring social and economic benefits, and address skills shortages which are occurring across the EU.

2.2. EU POLICY FRAMEWORK

The Asylum Seekers Theme (ETG5) was included in EQUAL at a time when EU policy makers were discussing the directive laying down minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers, which is one element of the establishment of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). This directive was adopted in January 2003 and the deadline for implementation by Member States was set to February 2005. Article 12 of the directive states that "Member States may allow applicants for asylum access to vocational training irrespective of whether the applicant has access to the labour market". It will therefore be important to demonstrate to Member States the benefits of allowing asylum seekers such access.

The new Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs, and in particular the employment guidelines, are placing emphasis on increasing the competitiveness of the EU and dealing with the demographic evolution by making more effective use of the migrant work force. Third-country nationals can make an important contribution to satisfying current and future labour market needs and therefore ensure economic stability and growth. The Policy Plan on Legal Migration includes a set of proposals and a roadmap to actions and legislative initiatives the European Commission intends to take in this area. It is based on an extensive consultation exercise following the Green Paper on an EU approach to managing economic migration. The Plan envisages the development and updating of existing legislation concerning the entry and residence of migrants, the provision of a legal basis for the European Migration Network and further activities in the area of integration. The latter includes the implementation of measures via the European Social Fund and the European Year of Equal Opportunities (2007). Even though the integration of asylum seekers, thus making effective use of their potential, may not be formally recognised in the Strategy and the Policy Plan, there is certainly scope for Member States to include them in the European Social Fund integration measures.

In 2005 the Commission adopted the Common Agenda for Integration, a Communication aimed at establishing a coherent European framework for the integration of third country nationals. The Communication meant to strengthen the Common Basic Principles on Integration agreed by JHA Council in November 2004. The latter presents integration as a two-way process, emphasising the need for civic orientation and education, intercultural learning and interaction between migrants and citizens.

¹ Policy Plan on Legal Migration, DG Justice, Freedom and Security, December 2005. Based on Eurostat data and projections.

The Social Inclusion Process is another important EU policy process which highlights the exclusion faced by migrants and aims to promote their social integration. It emphasises that the improved integration of immigrants requires building the capacity of those who work with them and improving the quality of services and support geared towards their insertion into the labour market. Asylum seekers are not included in the European Employment Strategy but Member States are increasingly promoting the integration of all disadvantaged groups, including migrant workers and ethnic minorities.

The ETG5 is concerned with identifying good practice and policy lessons from EQUAL which affect the social and vocational integration of asylum seekers in the EU. The education and training of asylum seekers is a relatively new area and there are marked differences in national regulatory frameworks with regard to access to courses and programmes. Activities for this target group had earlier mainly focused on providing for basic needs such as accommodation, food, and healthcare, and most of the literature on asylum has focused on policy, legislation and procedures.

3. NEW SOLUTIONS: GOOD PRACTICE FROM EQUAL

3.1. FACTORS THAT CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Nearly 85% of the 61 EQUAL partnerships operating in Round 2 are implementing activities in the area of advice, education and training. This includes general orientation and face-to-face counselling, activities to encourage empowerment and self-confidence of asylum seekers, education, training programmes and courses, on-the-job training and skills assessments.

Asylum seekers, as well as practitioners and organisations working with asylum seekers, are clearly benefiting from the EQUAL programme. The target numbers have been exceeded for many of the interventions implemented by the DPs, especially in the field of language courses. Several DPs have therefore started additional courses compared to their original plan. Innovative projects have been developed within various areas, often in modular form combining counselling, guidance and advice on the labour market and other courses. Some have also developed training packages and methods including on-the-job training, study visits, competency programmes and awareness raising activities. The following key success factors for promoting the provision of advice, education and training for asylum seekers have been identified:

- Integrating language teaching into a vocational programme and/or on-the-job training is not only cost-effective: it is also empowering for asylum seekers and speeds up their eventual integration. Many DP activities have combined language training with the acquisition of other skills such as computing or in the context of vocational training programmes.
- The development of specific vocational programmes for asylum seekers facilitates the learning process and enables them to better “profile” themselves on the labour market. Several DPs have described programmes which are targeted at the individual needs of asylum seekers as especially positive. The courses, methods and modules are tailored according to individual needs using flexible training methods and subjects.
- Traineeships and other forms of work placements are a first and important step to integration into the labour market which can also lead to “real” employment.

Overall, the motivation of asylum seekers participating in education and training activities is very high. Many had passed a long period of inactivity which affected their self-esteem and made them feel excluded from society. In particular, the direct involvement of asylum seekers in developing and running the activities has proved positive in terms of creating new models of empowerment for the target group. Positive outcomes for asylum seekers observed by DPs include improved language skills, health, self-esteem and motivation, less isolation and improved knowledge about the host society and increased integration.

3.2. GOOD PRACTICE FROM EQUAL

The European Thematic Group (ETG5) on Asylum Seekers organised in November 2003 a practice event on Advice, Education and Training which saw the active participation of nearly all Development Partnerships active under Round 1. Following a first call for good practices followed by initial validation by the ETG5, this event provided an opportunity for DPs to present and share successful examples of good practice, methods and processes concerning the advice, education and training of asylum seekers, and to compare them with other DP activities, while identifying complementarities and synergies between them.

The Swedish authority responsible for EQUAL, called the ESF Council, is planning a European Asylum Policy Forum on 22-24 May 2007 in the city of Malmö. One of the three main seminars and several workshops will be dedicated to the presentation and discussions on EQUAL good practices in the area of Advice, Education and Training. Specific attention will be placed on the extent to which the EQUAL practices have contributed to the adoption of measures at Member State level that go beyond the minimum standards of the Reception Directive. Several EQUAL partnerships will be invited to showcase at the event.

The work undertaken under the sub-theme of advice, education and training has revealed the following key principles for successful practices:

Language training combined with a vocational programme and/or on-the-job training is an effective way to speed-up the integration process.

Learning the language of a host country is an important element of integration, as it allows asylum seekers to become self-reliant in the host society and to communicate with those around them. Evidence from DP practices shows that asylum seekers learn a language quicker when their linguistic skills are directly applied in the context of vocational training or in a work environment. Civic education, including intercultural learning, also helps asylum seekers to better understand the host society.

For example, the EPIMA DP (Austria) helped young asylum seekers, including unaccompanied minors, to learn German in combination with vocational training and practical work experiences. The group of 14 young people (between 16 and 23) could not speak any German when they arrived in Austria and felt excluded and little understood. Thanks to the specific module-based courses they have been able to master the language and, more importantly, learn all essential words and expression in the vocational area of their interest, such as car mechanics or hairdressing. Through the on-the-job training, they had a chance to further improve their language and to learn new vocational skills. Multi-media classes allowed them to communicate with people all over the world. The training module has given participants the possibility to integrate in the host community and to prepare themselves for entering the labour market in sectors they are interested in.

EPIMA was continued under Round 2 of EQUAL. In its second phase, the project developed an interesting new initiative called "intercultural tandem", aimed at increasing the languages skills of the young asylum seekers and to stimulate intercultural learning with students from a College for Child Pedagogy in Vienna. The intercultural tandem initiative organises meetings between the asylum seekers and the students. They chose the theme to be discussed before each meeting, so that the asylum seekers have the possibility to practice the specific vocabulary with their language teacher beforehand. During the meetings, asylum seekers and students are split up in small groups that talk for 2.5 – 3 hours each time. In addition to improving their German, the young asylum seekers find out more about Austrian food, habit and traditions. The students, in return, learn about the different cultural backgrounds of the asylum seekers

The development of tailored vocational programmes specifically for asylum seekers facilitates the learning process and prepares them for entry into the labour market.

In Member States where asylum seekers can only be offered jobs when there are no nationals or legal residents available to fill the position. EQUAL partnerships are seeking to provide them with very specific skills and to concentrate on those areas of the labour market where their specific profile and competences are most valuable. This also applies to countries and regions with a tight labour market, as it helps to convince employers of the usefulness of hiring asylum seekers. Examples of areas where asylum seekers are making particular contributions include the health and care sectors, especially in relation to information and liaison with migrants as well as other sectors requiring intercultural and multi-linguistic skills.

The TransSpuk DP in Germany has focused on a vocational area where asylum seekers could really make a difference and not be considered “competitors” in the local labour market. The DP developed a training programme for asylum seekers to become Language and Cultural Mediators. The three-year programme consisted of a two-year theoretical part and on-the-job training of approximately one year, in collaboration with the local employment office. The internships would take place in different institutions of the public health and social services. By combining what they have learned so far with their own specific skills and resources (including languages, cultural background and understanding of other cultures, familiarity with the specific needs and conditions of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants), the participants have the potential to become real assets to regional and local health and social institutions which are dealing with high numbers of foreign clients.

TransSpuk, which trained 27 asylum seekers to become Language and Cultural Mediators, was continued under the name “TransKom” in Round 2 of EQUAL, and successfully expanded its training programme to 65 additional participants waiting for a decision on their status.

Traineeships and other forms of work placements are an important first step to the integration of asylum seekers which can lead to “real ” employment.

An obstacle faced by DPs is the difficulty for asylum seekers to gain professional experience in Member States where access to employment during the application period is prohibited. DPs have taken innovative approaches to tackle this obstacle by organising traineeships, job placements, and other possibilities such as job shadowing and voluntary work. These experiences strongly favour the integration of asylum seekers and increase their self-confidence while stimulating an intercultural learning process with the local community and the employers who hire them. The first results from the traineeships show that they are an excellent way, where possible, to access regular employment, as asylum seekers can show proof of work experience in the host country and have the opportunity to “network” with employers and promote their skills.

The Bridges Project is a work-shadowing scheme operated in Glasgow by the ATLAS DP. The aim of the project is to break down negative barriers between the asylum seeker community and employers and help asylum seekers to gain professional experience. Through the work-shadowing experience, participants have the opportunity to learn about local work habits and cultural differences and gain valuable professional experience, which prepares them for future employment. By working alongside asylum seekers, the local community has had an opportunity to learn about different cultures and the plight of asylum seekers, thus changing public perceptions and attitudes.

ATLAS was also selected for EQUAL support in Round 2. The Bridges work-shadowing scheme has been extended to up to 100 placements per year in public and private sector organisations. As part of the Bridges project, ATLAS is also developing an accreditation of the work-shadowing experiences and provides references and careers advice. The Bridges project also helps to identify re-training and re-skilling routes and signpost to further education and opportunities.

EQUAL’s transnational activities are also showing interesting outcomes in terms of learning from others and developing joint products. A transnational partnership between a Danish and a Dutch DP exchanged experiences and information on advice and training through the translation of course handbooks and programmes, study visits and the application of useful course elements of one DP in the context of the other.

4. POLICY MESSAGES:

EU policy actors: European Commission; European Parliament; and Member States:

- **Asylum seekers should continue receive support even when a decision on their application has been reached**

When asylum seekers receive a positive or negative decision on their application, they often have to stop all support and integration activities they were participating in while waiting for a decision on their status. They are simply considered a different target group. For people receiving the refugee status or other form of international protection, this often means being inserted in different integration programmes which in practice repeat much of what they already learned. Such unnecessary duplication should be avoided. For people receiving a negative decision, the situation is often worse: all activities are ceased while they could have strongly benefited from some form of reintegration support. Especially in the light of the increasingly shorter procedures

witnessed in a number of Member States, it is important to ensure some form of continuity as opposed to a serious disruption, duplication or complete interruption of support.

- **There is scope for “exceeding” the minimum standards of Article 12 of the Directive on minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers**

The experience of the EQUAL partnerships in the area of training helps make the case for the implementation of Article 12 of the Directive on minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers. Whilst the phrasing leaves a decision on access to vocational training to the Member States, the experience of the Development Partnerships illustrates the benefits this can bring not only to individuals but also to the host society. Member States which allow asylum seekers to access vocational training can testify higher levels of motivation and a faster integration in case asylum seekers receive a positive decision on their status. Asylum seekers faced with the necessity to return to their country of origin are also better prepared and more positive about their future.

National / regional / local authorities and employers:

- **The development of specific vocational programmes for asylum seekers facilitates the learning process and enables them to better “profile” themselves on the labour market**

In a number of Member States, asylum seekers can only be offered jobs when there are no nationals or other persons legally residing in the country available to fill the position. EQUAL partnerships are therefore seeking to provide them with very specific skills and to concentrate on those areas of the labour market where their profile and skills are most valuable. This also applies to countries and regions with a tight labour market, as it helps to convince employers of the usefulness of hiring asylum seekers.

- **Civic orientation and intercultural learning help both asylum seekers and the host society**

Integration is a two-way process. EQUAL partnerships have shown that civic orientation has is helping asylum seekers to better understand the new society and its basic values. At the same time, intercultural learning and dialogues have proved to be successful tools to stimulate interaction between the local community and the asylum seekers and to increase their mutual understanding and respect.

- **Traineeships and other forms of on-the-job training are a first and important step which help the integration of asylum seekers and can lead to “real ” employment**

Demonstrating the value of enabling asylum seekers to gain work experiences is an important challenge for EQUAL, as accessing regular employment during the application period is not easy even when Member States have adapted their legislation now allow this. Development Partnerships have been testing out some very interesting approaches that clearly illustrate the beneficial effects allowing asylum seekers to access vocational traineeships. Such opportunities also contribute to reintegration in case of return to their host country.

- **The European Social Fund 2007-2013 should include asylum seekers as a target group**

Even though the European Parliament made the case for asylum seekers being included as a separate target group, the new European Social Fund regulation does not refer to asylum seekers specifically but rather to the social inclusion of disadvantaged groups in general. However, this should not refrain national and regional authorities, as well as programme and project managers, from including asylum seekers in their Operational Programmes. EQUAL partnerships have proven the benefits of providing advice, education and training to this very disadvantaged group of people. The European Social Funds is the only EU financial instrument that has the scale and the scope to provide asylum seekers with education and training opportunities.

- **Transnational work encourages learning and the identification of approaches and methods which are applicable in different contexts**

Taken together, activities within the framework of EQUAL DPs and Transnational Co-operation Agreements (TCAs) under the Asylum Seekers Theme are demonstrating the benefits of being able to compare and learn from experiences across Member States. There is a wealth of experience in relation to advice, education and training for asylum seekers but activities often take place at a local level only. Transnationality provides a very high added value: it enables projects to learn from each other and to use those elements of approaches which would work well in their context too. This is not only cost-effective but it also enhances an understanding of the opportunities and challenges within different national contexts. The approaches developed by DPs on advice, education and training for asylum seekers (e.g. through module-based training, courses integrated with counselling, etc) could also be beneficial for actions beyond the target group of asylum seekers, such as newcomers in general or disadvantaged groups.