

## UP AND BEYOND – AIM HIGH!!

“Why create a problem if there is none? Why not let asylum seekers who want to work in the first place work? Access to work and professional training are very important means that give asylum seekers autonomy to start their new lives here in Portugal. Especially working is a great opportunity for newly arrived in our country to integrate in our society and be self-sufficient instead of relying on support from the government. Allowing asylum seekers to work is therefore also a beneficial for the government as costs in terms of economic support decreases” Mr. João Labescat, Head Office of the Secretary of Estate of the Internal Affairs Ministry, says with determination.

In Portugal, asylum seekers are allowed to start working as soon as they have received their provisional residence permit, which occurs after the asylum claim has been admitted to the second phase of procedures. The permit also gives them access to education and vocational training. According to national legislation<sup>1</sup>, a decision on admissibility of the asylum request has to be taken within 20 days (claims presented at national territory) or within 5 days (regarding claims presented at border points). However, the admissibility rate is extremely low: in 2006, it was 6.8%. The Reception Directive on minimum standards<sup>2</sup> establishes that all Member States shall provide in their national legislation that at the latest one year after having lodged their application, asylum seekers have right to access the labour market. The time when asylum seekers can start working therefore varies significantly between the 25 Member States. Portugal is amongst the Member States with the shortest waiting time before asylum seekers are allowed to start working.

In order for asylum seekers to be able to take on a job, language competences and relevant vocational training is, however, directly crucial. But if one comes from a completely different culture and education system, it might not be very straightforward to realise what competences are valuable in the new society and what additional skills one needs to start working. The Portuguese EQUAL partnership VIAAS (Vias de Interculturalidade na Area do Asilo) has created a number of activities in order to facilitate the access of asylum seekers to the labour market and integrate smoothly in the Portuguese society, including the development of a method to validate the skills of asylum seekers, provision of vocational training, language courses, cultural expression and art ateliers.

The partnership is coordinated by the Portuguese Refugee Council (PRC). “The PRC has been working with the rights of asylum seekers since 1991” the director of PRC, Mrs. Maria Teresa Tito de Morais Mendes explains. “Not all of the other organisations in our partnership have worked extensively with this group of people before, but contribute with specific knowledge from developing relevant practices targeted at other groups with specific needs. Therefore, not only has the partnership allowed us to create innovative instruments specifically developed in view of asylum seekers’ situation, but also sensitise other organisations about what asylum seekers and their rights in Portugal are”. According to Mrs. Maria Teresa Tito de Morais Mendes sensitisation of other organisations, however, goes beyond merely the partners involved in the scope of VIAAS. Many employers are unaware of the meaning of the provisional residence permit or even the ‘refugee card’, which recognises refugee status, compared to the more familiar visa and are sceptical towards hiring asylum seekers and refugees. Therefore, awareness raising in general, both of employers and the local community, is an important objective of the partnership.

---

<sup>1</sup> Asylum law 15/98 26 March

<sup>2</sup> Short title for Council Directive 2003/9/EC laying down minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers.

## **EQUAL RECEPTION IN THE CENTRE OF THE COMMUNITY – NOT ONLY FOR THE BENEFIT OF ASYLUM SEEKERS**

---

“In the reception phase, it is very important for asylum seekers to not only receive judicial aid, but also assistance with preparing their social, vocational and educational integration in our for them new society. Our organisation is the first contact point for asylum seekers when they arrive in Portugal since we run the Reception Centre here in Loures, Mrs. Maria Teresa Tito de Morais Mendes says. “Around 100 asylum seekers arrive each year and this number has been rather steady in recent years. Asylum seekers who arrive in Portugal spend their first two to three months at our Reception Centre in Loures; then they have to leave their place for other newly arrived as we only have 21 places. Or at least had 21 places – the construction of a new Reception Centre with space for 34 asylum seekers has just been finalised” she adds enthusiastically.

The new Reception Centre is, however, not only a place to accommodate asylum seekers during their first months in Portugal. The centre is an excellent meeting point for asylum seekers and the local community, providing not only a new venue for hosting bands, theatre groups etc., but also a day care centre for children where asylum seekers’ children are placed together with Portuguese children, a public garden and sports facilities where the newly arrived get the opportunity to enjoy games together with their peers from Portugal. Naturally, since being a Reception Centre, the new building also has accommodation space with beds for 34 asylum seekers, including facilities for disabled, and a Kitchen.

“When building this new Reception Centre, we wanted to create a place where asylum seekers and Portuguese citizens get to meet naturally whilst enjoying leisure activities and ensure that asylum seekers do not become isolated in the outskirts of the city as can often be the case. We therefore queried the local community of what facilities they thought were lacking, for example day care for their children, and made sure that these facilities were integrated in the drawing of the centre. We also looked at Reception Centres in other countries to learn from innovative ideas across Europe. The EQUAL programme and the EQUAL principles have been imperative for this initiative and we very much look forward to the positive results this will bring about in terms of social integration and decreased xenophobia” Mrs. Maria Teresa Tito de Morais Mendes concludes.

In the Centre, asylum seekers will receive Portuguese language courses and get the opportunity to participate in, for example, theatre groups. Learning Portuguese already at very early stages in the reception process is essential for a fast and smooth not only social, but also vocational integration in their new society. Indeed, learning Portuguese language is integrated in all activities that have been developed by the VIAAS EQUAL partnership. One of these activities is an excellent example of an integrated approach that addresses both social and vocational integration in the Portuguese society. Through the EQUAL project, a one-year long vocational training programme has been opened up for asylum seekers in an activity run by one of the EQUAL partners, namely the CFPSA (Vocational Training Centre for the Alimentary Sector). This training centre, which was started in 1984, provides vocational training both for those without skills in the specific area and for those with some prior skills, e.g. Portuguese citizens who already work or have worked in companies. Asylum seekers who participate in this programme get two to three weeks pre-training to determine the interest and aptitude of the individual.

Vocational training programmes in a variety of fields are available at the school, and asylum seekers have so far participated in three different areas, in which there is an evident lack of people to take on work. Interviews were undertaken with representatives of a number of different sectors in order to find out where there are labour market needs for new employees, and on the basis of these interviews, it was decided to give the asylum seekers the possibility to train to become butchers, service waiters and to carry out food controls. “Asylum seekers is a group with specific characteristics and needs, and we therefore adapted out training to allow them to get the best possible support to participate in the training and succeed to get their diploma” Mrs. Gracinda Ramos, director of the CFPSA, explains. Such adaptations include, for example, provision of Portuguese language and counselling in addition to theoretical and practical courses in the training centre. “Also, for the recruitment of participants, tests have been translated and we provide the possibility to take the tests orally instead of in writing”.

Maria Golemi<sup>3</sup> is one of four asylum seekers who participated in the first phase of the project in which two asylum seekers were trained to become butchers and two to become service waiters. In fluent Portuguese she explains that “For me, this was a fantastic opportunity that I could not miss! When I started, I only spoke a few words of Portuguese, and now, only eight months later, I not only speak Portuguese, but have also learnt a new profession”. Not only did Maria Golemi manage to learn Portuguese in record time, but throughout individual classes carried out by the Portuguese Refugee Council in the training centre, she was also rated the best in her class to become service waiter, and was hand-picked by a four star hotel to do her two months internship, which is also part of the programme. The participation of asylum seekers in this training programme allows them to both get an opportunity to learn Portuguese and a new profession. At the same time they are on a fast track to integrate in the Portuguese society socially, as they are included in a group with Portuguese citizens during their training, and also get Portuguese colleagues at their work place at the time of their internship.

## **VALIDATION OF COMPETENCES IN PORTUGAL ... AND ACROSS EUROPE**

---

Not all asylum seekers are, however, ready to start a vocational training programme straight away. The director of the PRC explains that “Asylum seekers is a group of people who often cannot make use of all professional competences they have from their country of origin in Portugal, which is at least partly a consequence of that many come without their professional and educational certificates. Therefore, we started cooperating with Santa Casa, one of several organisations in a Portuguese national network that has the right to recognise school competences. Santa Casa has been involved in our partnership since Round 1 of EQUAL, but not this specific part of the organisation that is responsible for undertaking competence assessments”.

“We had been working with other groups of people with special needs before this EQUAL project” Mrs. Ana Cameira, Coordinator of the Centre for the Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences (CRVCC) / Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Lisboa (SCML), says. “We are indeed around 2,000 organisations with the right to validate competences, but we work with different target groups and each organisation has to adapt their assessments in accordance with guidelines established by the Ministry of Education. These guidelines are based on competence assessments in four main fields: (1) Maths for life; (2) Technical competences; (3) Language and community; and (4) Citizenship and employability. Therefore, despite that we work with different target groups, the result of the validation should always be the same.” The group with special needs Santa Casa worked with before involving asylum seekers was mainly individuals monitored by social workers employed by Santa Casa (including those without jobs, with economic problems and otherwise socially excluded). Common for all individuals that participated in the validation of competences is, however, that they do not have an academic degree, but life experiences that are also very valuable and lack successful integration in the society. “We do more than just recognition of skills, though” Mrs. Ana Cameira explains. “When we see that an individual has a certain interest or aptitude in a specific area, for example computers or photography, we help developing these competences and set up an action plan on how this can become a reality in terms of a profession. At the same time we ensure that plans agreed are in line with labour market needs”.

At the SCML all individuals are assessed in all four key areas with the assistance of a “mediator” that goes through a reference guide to validate the skills of the participant. However, the same process is not used for all, but adapted to individual needs. “For asylum seekers, we put the main emphasis on the two areas language and community, and citizenship and employability” Dr. Ana Cameira says. “We focus on training, job and the social situation here in Portugal so as to not remind them of traumatic experiences in their home country. Also, we address a particular group of asylum seekers, namely those with at least a basic level of Portuguese and who are not highly educated. Most asylum seekers have, though, at least some basic knowledge of Portuguese from their lessons in the Reception Centre and of course we do not expect asylum seekers to be fluent in Portuguese. An important added value of this activity is, in fact, the improvement of their

---

<sup>3</sup> Not real name.

language skills as they need to talk about themselves in Portuguese both in individual and group sessions.”

The validation of competences results in a certificate for one of three different levels: the fourth, sixth or ninth grade. To be able to obtain a certificate, the individual needs to have passed the criteria for a specific level in all four main areas included in a model from the Ministry. No “normal” written tests are, though, undertaken. “We assess the participant’s competences by undertaking different activities. For example, if an individual is interested in photography, we ask him or her to bring a few photos to the SCML and analyse them together with the mediator” Mrs. Ana Cameira says. “The mediator then assesses the individual’s level on the basis of language used and the content of the analysis by the participant”. Work is undertaken both in the form of individual sessions with a mediator, and in groups in case of training needs. Normally around 46 hours of sessions with a mediator during a time period of six months are necessary to go through the competence analysis process, whereas for some it can take up to two years. At the end, an orientation plan will be agreed, according to the individual’s needs and interest. Such an orientation plan can include starting training or education needed for a specific job or directly start looking for a job. In case the individual will start looking for a job, they get assistance creating a CV and writing a cover letter. “I really wanted to get my competences validated” Abdul Dirie<sup>4</sup> says. He continues: “My dream is to become an electrician but I do not have the necessary education and cannot start it without getting my competences validated. Therefore, having the chance to participate in this programme means the world to me”.

The importance and relevance of validating the skills of asylum seekers has not only been recognised in Portugal, but also by other Asylum Seekers EQUAL partnerships across Europe. The Portuguese partnership VIAAS is part of the transnational partnership PASSI (Prepare Asylum Seekers and Society for Integration) involving partnerships from four other Member States, namely Italy (Orizzonti), Malta (Asylum Seekers Partnership), Greece (Ακτινεργία) and Germany (Arbeit und Bildung International). As part of the common activities developed in the transnational partnership, a model for Evaluation and Validation of Competences/Skills (EVC model) is being developed. Mr. Tito Matos, Project Coordinator in the PRC emphasises that “Transnational cooperation plays a very important role in the development of successful activities and approaches for the socio-vocational integration of asylum seekers. All partner organisations benefit from learning and discussing experiences and activities with actors from various other contexts, cultures and countries. We in Portugal have for instance a lot to learn from more developed countries and countries that receive more asylum seekers. Transnational cooperation ensures that we do not make the same mistakes, and leads to better guarantees for good services to asylum seekers across the EU.” In terms of the transnational EVC model, learning is being maximised. “Through Exchange Events arranged by the European Thematic Group for Asylum Seekers in Round 1 and in Round 2, we have had the opportunity to meet actors working in the same field. Now, that we wanted to develop a common EVC model, I knew other organisations in other countries that had also worked on such skills assessments, and contacted them to draw on their experiences and ensure that valuable information is taken up. Now we develop a model together with other EQUAL partnerships, which will be tested in our various national contexts. Our competence assessment undertaken by Santa Casa with asylum seekers here in Portugal forms an important part of the common model”.

## NIGHT TURNS INTO DAY

---

“In Round 1 of EQUAL, running from 2002 to 2005, we worked quite hard to get organisations on board in our partnership” Mrs. Maria Teresa Tito de Morais Mendes says. “I am the first to admit that it was not an easy job to get the various organisations on board, and in Round 1 we were not really a consolidated partnership. Our organisation, the PCR, both coordinated the partnership and ran all activities. The difference between our way of working in Round 1 of EQUAL and Round 2 is like night and day – after the initial struggle to involve the partners in Round 1, all three organisations stayed on for Round 2, and each partner organisation is now leading at least one activity. The difference in commitment and engagement is remarkable!” Only one partner in

---

<sup>4</sup> Not real name.

the VIAAS partnership is new: the CFPSA, which was involved as this organisation provide vocational training, which was one of the activities that the VIAAS partnership wanted to work with in Round 2 and where none of the existing partners had the relevant knowledge or structure to set up an activity.

In the partnership there is only one organisation, namely the PCR, that is specialised in working with asylum seekers. The other organisations had worked with immigrants and other socially excluded prior to joining the partnership, but never with asylum seekers to the degree as is the case in EQUAL. Mrs. Ana Cristina Valério from the City Council of Loures explains that the Council had not worked directly with asylum seekers at all before the EQUAL project, but is now providing volunteering opportunities for a specific group of asylum seekers, namely those in the appeal process who cannot work. The Social Welfare Institute is another of the partners that has stayed on from Round 1 of EQUAL. “Our organisation in fact has to support asylum seekers and refugees as part of the work we are doing” Mrs. Maria Julieta Santos says. “EQUAL, however, has provided us with a fantastic opportunity to get much better knowledge of the needs of this group of people, which in turn helps us create better quality solutions to assist them in their integration in our society. “For us it has been a truly excellent experience to be involved in this EQUAL project” Miss. Regina Almeida from Santa Casa adds. “The concepts we have developed in the scope of this EQUAL partnership can – and will – definitely be integrated in our other activities, as they are also very relevant for other groups of socially excluded.”

That the initial partnership building was quite demanding is, however, something all partners agree on. Round 1 was very much a learning process – both in terms of the development of activities and working together as a partnership. In Round 2, the organisations are to a much greater extent working together as a “whole”. Even though the partnership was not functioning equally successfully as in Round 2, the work in Round 1 proved, however, very useful to consolidate the partnership. A number of good practices from working together in Round 1 have been maintained. Several of these relate to creating a commitment and engagement amongst the partners. One of these is a rotating system of arranging meetings between the partners, since it in Round 1 became clear that being responsible for a specific task leads to that the partners get more engaged.

In terms of the meetings between the partners, sometimes these are arranged around specific themes, but at the same time, it has been seen as very important to be flexible enough to change the agenda or discuss specific items as they come up. The meetings also serve to review activities that have been undertaken by each partner and in order to make sure that responsibilities are shared. This leads to that all partners get information about what the others are doing, which creates a sense of real team work and real partnership working! In EQUAL 1 the partners did not do such follow-ups together.

“We have a very good balance between formal and informal working arrangements” Mrs. Ana Cristina Valério says, and the other partners agree. “This is possible as we know each other for quite some time now. We do have formal solutions in terms of what to do in case it would not be possible to reach a decision concerning a specific activity or way forward (which is majority decision or that the CPR decides if votes are equal), but informally we would never go ahead with something that one partner would be completely against.”

The VIAAS partnership has also brought about benefits at other levels in the organisations, not the least through involvement of all directors in the project, which has had important spin-off effects in terms of opening up activities to asylum seekers and to create a commitment to the issue of asylum seekers’ integration. The directors of all partner organisations participated in a transnational meeting hosted by their partner in Malta, where the directors got to visit the project, met others working in the same area in other countries, and not least important: the other directors in the Portuguese partnership. The closer contacts between the directors has already resulted in that the director of the Vocational training centre opened up more courses for asylum seekers to participate in and Santa Casa agreed to provide financial support to asylum seekers until the end of the project, although the organisation previously had considered to reduce the support.

“Being involved in this EQUAL partnership has helped us all to work better together and help asylum seekers in a much better way – which means that asylum seekers get much better and

higher quality support and thereby a much better starting point to successfully integrate in our society” the partners conclude with enthusiasm.

## **CONTACT DETAILS**

---

Dr. Tito Matos

Project Coordinator VIAAS

Portuguese Refugee Council

Tel. + 351 21 831 43 84

Fax + 351 21 837 50 72

[tito.matos@cpr.pt](mailto:tito.matos@cpr.pt)