

## LAYING NEW TRACKS FOR THE VOCATIONAL INTEGRATION AND CAREER ADVANCEMENT OF IMMIGRANTS

In Austria, the level of education and training amongst immigrants has significantly changed over the past years. Whereas economic migration in the 1970s was marked by an influx of unskilled workers, many more have arrived recently with a qualification acquired in their country of origin and the proportion of graduates amongst these new arrivals is even higher than amongst the indigenous workers. However, this potential remains largely unexploited, as in most cases these qualifications are not formally recognised by the Austrian labour market. Thus, about 45% of immigrant workers have to accept a job below their level of competence and one which offers very few opportunities for career advancement. An EQUAL Development Partnership in Vienna has piloted new forms of support which help recently-arrived workers to access employment that matches their qualification and offers perspectives for further progression.

### A NEW ALLIANCE TO UNLOCK THE POTENTIAL OF QUALIFIED IMMIGRANTS

The acronym ICE normally stands for InterCity Express, which is a fast comfortable train connecting large European cities. In Vienna, ICE also stands for [InterCulturExpress](#), which is the name of a large EQUAL Development Partnership (DP) that has pioneered new approaches to changing the right sets of points to speed up the immigrants' journey to employment and improved chances of career development. From July 2005 to June 2007, ICE tested these approaches through several interrelated pilot projects, each of which featured a particular aspect of the DP's overall strategy. *"Recent arrivals know little about their choices on the Austrian labour market and the services that may be available to them. They need active support to prevent them from sliding down on a spiral of de-qualification which may lead them into social deprivation and poverty. We wanted to demonstrate that this can be avoided through a package of complementary measures and that such measures are the more effective the earlier they reach the newcomers"*, explains Sonja Sari, the DP coordinator, and she adds *"we believe that ICE has been the engine that has pushed forward the development of new practices in Vienna."*



Sonja Wehsely (featuring on the ICE poster), Brigitte Jank and Sonja Sari (right)

InterCulturExpress set out to assist immigrants who had already acquired a qualification and/or work experience in their country of origin, by giving visibility to their skills and competences and by offering them opportunities for further education and training. Right from the start, ICE has been backed up by key actors from the city administration and the business world with two main representatives from each sphere. The [Department for Integration and Diversity](#), which operates as an interface

between migration organisations, NGOs and the City of Vienna, and the [Immigration Authority](#), worked alongside the Viennese [Economic Chamber](#) and the [Chamber of Labour](#). At a press conference to launch the DP, Sonja Wehsely, who was then in charge of the Integration Department, stressed that *"our economy has a strong demand for well qualified workers who, in addition to German and English, speak a Central- or East-European language. Unemployed immigrants must not perceive their situation as being a lost cause. The key to success in the labour market is vocational qualification – for all people, wherever they have been born. Valuing existing competences should offer better chances to the many immigrants who work in jobs requiring a level of skills below the qualification that they had originally achieved. Therefore, the City of Vienna is fully committed to the ICE initiative."* On the same occasion, Brigitte Jank, the Chair of the Economic Chamber of Vienna reinforced this point of view: *"Without immigrant workers, some sectors or branches would not be able to meet their demand for qualified staff"*,

she stated and then promised that "as a strategic partner of the InterCulturExpress project, we will ensure that the whole range of our support for occupational advancement is accessible to all people, regardless of their origin."

## **A COMPREHENSIVE PACKAGE OF NEW COMPLEMENTARY MEASURES**

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The InterCulturExpress was designed to move forward simultaneously on six tracks, or sub-projects, that were interconnected through various junctions. In developing these sub-projects, ICE was able to build on the achievements of its predecessor, a First Round EQUAL DP called [qualifikation stärkt](#) (qualification strengthens). However, ICE addressed a number of additional issues that had been identified during the course of this previous project and provided a new consolidated framework to promote immigrants' hitherto untapped competences and potential on the labour market. Overall coordination was ensured by the Vienna [Advice Centre for Migrants](#) (Beratungszentrum für Migranten und Migantinnen), an organisation which is well placed to continue to promote the approaches that have been successfully tested by the DP.

### **Green Light for Valuing Immigrants' Competences and Qualifications**

A central pillar in the DP's work was a project named [AMPEL](#) (the German word for traffic light), which developed information modules on questions related to the validation or recognition of qualifications that immigrants have acquired in their country of origin. Approaches to individual guidance and counselling on this issue had already been piloted during the First Round EQUAL DP and comprehensive information is now accessible via a special homepage ([www.wequam.at](http://www.wequam.at)) of the Advice Centre for Migrants. However, a strong demand for further information on this issue was expressed by professional staff from institutions that provide guidance and integration services for immigrants. The AMPEL project reacted by designing a programme of one-day [workshops](#) for experts, counsellors and other multipliers to transfer knowledge about regulations and procedures concerning the recognition of educational achievements and vocational qualifications. These workshops also covered a range of related topics such as intercultural counselling, anti-discrimination strategies and diversity management.

*"The response to this offer has exceeded our highest expectations. All in all, over 500 multipliers participated in the 30 workshops and more than half of them were of migrant origin themselves,"* reports AMPEL coordinator Asiye Sel. She is also pleased that *"participants came from over 60 organisations, including public administrations, NGOs, training institutions and labour market intermediaries. Many of them have stayed in contact and there is a lot of networking between them. All this has generated a real snowball effect which continues to stimulate the transfer of information on the issues that were addressed in the workshops."*

Much of the attraction of the AMPEL project was attributable to the quality and specific expertise of the consultants and instructors who had agreed to make presentations during the workshops. Together they gave a comprehensive overview of the particular responsibilities and activities of all the bodies that are concerned with the issue of validation and recognition, including the relevant ministries, universities and other educational institutions, and employers and workers organisations. *"A simple unified system or procedure for formal recognition of qualifications acquired outside the EU is not yet in reach",* emphasises Norbert Bichl, one of the directors of the Advice Centre, *"but what we have achieved is a much better level of knowledge about these processes amongst those who provide advice, guidance and other support to immigrant citizens. This gives a new quality to such services."*

The materials and conclusions that emerged from the AMPEL workshops also provided an important input into the work of most of the other ICE sub-projects. Key lessons from the workshops were summarised in a [handbook](#) for counsellors, trainers and multipliers, to assist them in counteracting discrimination in the labour market and to support their work on the vocational integration of immigrants.

### **Qualifying Immigrants for work as Intercultural Vocational Counsellors and Trainers**

How can individual experience of migration be harnessed to improve counselling and vocational guidance for immigrants? The ICE sub-project [LEUCHTTURM](#) (Lighthouse) has answered this question by developing and testing a model for a [one year course](#) offering immigrants the possibility to qualify to work as intercultural counsellors. The project was piloted by the [Integrationshaus](#) association, one of the operational partners in the DP. LEUCHTTURM was designed to address a particular problem that had emerged in several sub-

projects of the First Round DP (qualifikation stärkt), namely to find qualified trainers and counsellors who had the intercultural experience and competences that are required to assist the vocational integration of immigrants and refugees.

*"Immigrants need particular support enabling them to avail themselves of existing training and employment opportunities. In comparison to people who have grown up in Austria, they often lack basic information about the labour market. Language problems are another barrier to progression through the available guidance and training offers", argues Verena Plutzar, the course coordinator. She also explains that "current vocational orientation courses very rarely provide such support, although immigrants represent about 30% of their participants. Our project has shown that people who themselves have a personal experience of migration and a relevant qualification can cover this gap, because they are particularly well placed to perceive immigrants' individual needs and strengths and to relate these to the requirements of the labour market. But equally important was the related empowerment effect. We were able to demonstrate how individuals from groups that are facing discrimination in the labour market can be mobilised to become actors who are able to make an important contribution to the vocational integration of these groups."*

The LEUCHTTURM course addressed immigrants who had acquired, in their country of origin, a qualification in the fields of pedagogy, psychology or social work and/or who had already experience of voluntary guidance and counselling work in Austria. The ten different learning units provided general knowledge about the rules and functioning of labour market, as well as basic skills related to guidance and counselling, working with groups, knowledge management and quality assurance. In addition, the learning units also covered topics that prepared the participants to work specifically with immigrants and refugees, including knowledge about legal aspects, intercultural competence and approaches to identifying, and coping with, discriminatory practices in the labour market. The course combined theoretical instruction with practical work experience, involving a range of adult education and training institutions and guidance services.

As the capacity was limited, only 16 participants could be admitted and these were selected from about 50 applicants. However, the intercultural potential of these, mainly female, participants was much wider than it might have been expected from such a relatively small group: they represented 14 different nationalities and together they had mastered 25 languages. All participants completed the course by taking a final examination that complied with the requirements for qualification to work as a trainer or counsellor in vocational orientation measures funded by the public employment service. This positive experience has stimulated further discussion with, and between, the competent bodies to agree on a formally recognised vocational profile for trainers and counsellors specialising in work with immigrants and ethnic minorities.

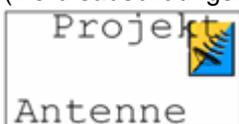
The LEUCHTTURM [framework curriculum](#) can now be downloaded from the ICE website and a number of training providers have already manifested a considerable interest in replicating the course. One issue for further work is exploring possible arrangements for part-time delivery. This would facilitate the involvement of those who wish to combine participation in the course with work in their current job and it might also make this training more attractive to male candidates.

### **Customised Preparation for Training and Career Entry**

Experience from the First Round DP had shown how immigrants' access to training and employment can be facilitated by offering them opportunities to strengthen certain key competences, such as the capacity for self-organised learning, the use of IT and vocational language skills. The ICE DP demonstrated that this form of preparation is even more effective if it is combined with structured information and practical advice on legal issues concerning immigration and citizenship, social security, labour market regulations and other topics about which immigrants need to be aware if they are to exploit fully the existing opportunities for further training and employment and make use of their entitlements and rights.

Three sub-projects have piloted this new approach by developing models for flexible courses, lasting 12 – 14 weeks, which respond to different needs of the target group.

The [ANTENNE](#) project was launched by the Centre for Adult Education and Training (Berufsausbildungszentrum - [BAZ](#)) of the Institute for Vocational Advancement (Berufsförderungsinstitut – [bfi](#)) in Vienna to develop and test a preparatory course for immigrants who want to train for work in the metal or electrical fields. *"We had noticed that many applicants did not have sufficient knowledge of the technical language and terminology to follow training for*



occupations in these fields, although they might have got on fairly well in colloquial speech. Our new course is aimed at this target group for which there was no appropriate provision," says project leader Thomas Grübl in explaining the origin of the new approach. Prior to the launch of ANTENNE, training candidates who failed the entrance test as a result of linguistic shortcomings were normally referred back to the employment services which offered them a general six months German course before they could apply again. However, experience had shown that conventional language instruction did not significantly increase the chances of passing these tests.



Participant of the ANTENNE course

The ANTENNE approach to improving technical language skills has proved to be much more successful. It is based on methods and materials that foster the participants' motivation and ability to progress through self-study and group learning and that also seek to identify, and build on, their different individual competences. An additional element is the Information and Sensitisation module (InfoSens), which is an integral part of the course providing information and practical exercises to develop a better understanding of the legal situation of immigrants and to increase the participant' intercultural self-confidence. The pilot phase of the project included two test runs, each involving 13 participants. Most of them were subsequently admitted to a regular training programme of the Adult Training Centre (BAZ) but some of the others found employment immediately after the ANTENNE course. The BAZ is now planning to establish the new course model as a permanent feature (ANTENNE 2) of its training provision.

Elements of the InfoSens module were also used successfully in the [PONTE](#) sub-project which was implemented by the [Hebebühne](#) (The Lift) association, an NGO providing individual advice and assistance to disadvantaged people who need special support and mediation for their social and vocational integration. This project set out to address the particular problems of unemployed



immigrants whose personal or psychological situations were not sufficiently stable to find a footing in the labour market by themselves. Many of the problems that they faced resulted from their migration biographies or their traumatising experiences as refugees. In two waves, each involving 12 participants, PONTE piloted a course adapted to the specific needs of this target group. It offered a [basic IT qualification](#)

through e-learning, combined with individual psycho-social assistance, intercultural communication training and personal coaching for career planning and job search. Susanne Praschak, the project leader, is quick to point out that "*the innovative aspects of this approach reside in the effective link between all these elements and in the mix of methods that foster self-assurance, group work and self-organised learning.*" The project approach and the course curriculum are summarised in the [PONTE handbook](#) which can be downloaded from the ICE website.

The [BIMM](#) project (Vocational Integration and Mentoring for Migrant Women) combined vocational preparation and guidance with a mentoring programme. The project was implemented by [abz.austria](#) (Ausbildungs- und Beschäftigungszentrum für Frauen), a non-profit enterprise offering training and employment opportunities for women and a range of different business



services related to gender and diversity issues. "*For many highly competent immigrant women, it is almost impossible to enter a career that is commensurate with their level of education and training, because their*

*qualifications are not formally recognised and because they have little experience of work in Austria, but last and not least, because they lack professional contacts*", explains Manuela Vollmann, one of the directors of abz.austria. She also stresses that "*the primary barrier for these*

women is not the notorious 'glass ceiling' that affects their career advancement but rather the 'glass door' which bars their entry to the labour market. Therefore it is very important to establish networks that offer them gateways to qualified jobs. The BIMM initiative covers new ground in this respect in that it demonstrates how the concept of mentoring, which is already well-tried in other contexts, can be adapted and harnessed to the particular situation of highly qualified immigrant women".

The BIMM approach has two stages. The first phase involves an orientation course enabling participants to ascertain their own professional potential, including their intercultural competence and previous vocational experience. They also become acquainted with labour market rules and procedures. Through a combination of instruction, tutorial work and periods of self-study they learn to plan their (re-)entry into employment and find out about possible job opportunities. In the second phase, each participant is offered assistance from a personal mentor for a period of four months after completion of the course. This mentor helps her to realise her (re-)entry plans and facilitates contacts with relevant professional networks. The mentors who piloted the BIMM approach were women with a personal history of migration or with intercultural experience and who also had an established record in the vocational field to which their respective mentees aspired.



Participants of the BIMM course

The two pilots involved a total of 24 participants from 14 different nationalities, but the number of applications by far exceeded the number of available places. At the end of the aftercare period, most participants had found employment or had entered further training. However, those who remained unemployed felt that the combination of the course with a subsequent mentoring programme had greatly enhanced their self-confidence and capacities for active job search. The experience of the BIMM project has been summarised in a publication entitled "[Die gläserne Tür öffnen](#)" (Opening the Glass Door), which is available on the ICE website.

### **Migration and Gender Mainstreaming**

Gender and a background of migration are factors that can expose immigrant women to double discrimination in the labour market. Gender Equality has therefore been a transversal aspect of all activities of ICE but it was also the central concern in one of its sub-projects. The [Gender Mainstreaming](#) project was coordinated by an association called [Autonome Österreichische Frauenhäuser](#) (Austrian Women's Shelter Network) and produced two major outcomes. The first was the compilation of a "[Gender Map](#)" which is a thoroughly researched and regularly updated documentation on Gender and Migration that includes references to appropriate materials and information on relevant actions and regulations at regional, national and European level. In the early phases of the DP this documentation was made accessible, via the ICE website, to operators in all sub-projects to underpin their approach to gender equality. However, it has also been a tool to promote awareness of issues related to Gender, Diversity and Discrimination amongst employers and actors in the labour market and it continues to fulfil this function.

The second product is a 30-minute, DVD-film entitled "[Chance Migration](#)", that draws on experience and contributions from all the ICE sub-projects. The film is primarily intended for use in training institutions and enterprises to stimulate discussion, reflection and reappraisal. It was first released in June 2007 and illustrates very clearly the main overall message of the DP: "*Immigrants should not be perceived as a 'problem group'. Migration can provide new opportunities – if both sides, immigrants and labour market actors, do their bit*".

## **LEARNING AND DISSEMINATION THROUGH TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION**

Within the context of the EQUAL Transnational Partnership (TP) [MEET](#) (Migrants - Employment - Empowerment - Training), ICE worked closely with DPs from Germany, Italy, the Netherlands

and the UK. InterCulturExpress coordinated the transnational work on skills development for migrants and refugees, which was the central issue in one of the TP's working groups. In turn, ICE was able to draw on the advanced experience of some of its transnational partners, especially in the development of mainstreaming strategies for the accreditation of migrants' qualifications, the use of e-learning and awareness-raising among stakeholders. In June 2007, the MEET TP presented its results and recommendations for further action at a final conference, in Brussels, on "*Integrating Migrants into the EU Labour Market through Recognition, Skills Development and Awareness Raising*".

In addition, ICE was also actively involved in the European Programme for Mainstreaming the outcomes of EQUAL that combat discrimination against immigrants and ethnic minorities. The DP contributed to a transnational seminar that brought together NGOs with particular experience in this field, from eight different Member States. This event was one of the five [peer review seminars](#) that were organised, during the first half of 2007, to analyse progress achieved through the work of EQUAL and to draw out the appropriate lessons. The conclusions from these seminars have provided a basis for the presentation of recommendations for practitioners and decision makers, at a [European Equal conference](#) in November 2007, in Paris. These recommendations are also intended to inform the implementation of the 2007/2013 ESF programmes and the main EU employment, anti-discrimination and inclusion policies.

### Three Important Conclusions from InterCulturExpress

Both the operational and the strategic partners who were involved in the ICE DP conclude from their experience that:

1. "Immigrants offer manifold competences that are not perceived by employment intermediaries and the business world. ICE has demonstrated how these competences can be made visible and be brought to bear in the labour market, for the mutual benefit of both immigrants and employers;
2. The integration of immigrants can be greatly facilitated if qualifications that they have acquired in their county of origin are valued properly on the labour market. Whilst formal recognition of these qualifications is hindered by a complicated web of administrative regulations, much progress can be made by ensuring that employment and training intermediaries, relevant multipliers and immigrant workers are well informed about how to navigate through these regulations;
3. Immigrants' vocational integration can be greatly enhanced if they are offered professional support in ascertaining their own competences and potential, and if their access to employment is assisted by counsellors and mentors who have intercultural experience."

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Link to EQUAL database descriptions:

EQUAL Round 2: [ICE- InterCulturExpress - Transnational Partnership MEET](#)

EQUAL Round 1: [Qualifikation stärkt - Transnational Partnership Made-to-Measure for Migrants](#)