

ASYLUM SEEKERS QUALIFY TO HELP OTHERS

Imagine that you are in a country where you do not understand or speak the language and that you get ill and have to go to see a doctor. What would you do? Try to find someone who could accompany you and help interpreting? This could prove more difficult than it may sound. Medical terminology is not that easy and it may be very difficult to explain the exact problem, not to mention understanding what the doctor says you are suffering from. Asylum seekers may also be traumatised and have difficulties expressing what the problem is even in their own language. This is a situation many asylum seekers end up in when they arrive in a new country, and it is only one problem they face when they get in touch with social and health care services.

Knowing the language is the starting point for integrating in a new society and finding work. For many asylum seekers getting a job is extremely difficult, since language is not the only obstacle they face but there may also, as is the case in Germany, be very strict requirements for asylum seekers to obtain a work permit.

The TransSPuk¹ Development Partnership, led by the Regional Office Berg City Triangle Remscheid Solingen Wuppertal, has established a new profession by creating a qualification for asylum seekers to become language and cultural mediators in the public health and social services sectors. In Germany, there is an urgent need for this type of work. Christian Råbergh from the Swedish ESF Council, who attended a conference in Berlin in the autumn 2004 on 'New ways to improve health and services for asylum seekers and migrants'², said that: "At the conference, there were interesting interventions from researchers and experts who presented a gloomy picture of the situation in German health care services for asylum seekers. There is no regular system for interpreters or other types of support. As an example, a study at Berlin Charité hospital showed that interpretation was made to 43% by relatives – mostly children – , 13% by cleaning staff and only 1% by professional interpreters. Moreover, there was no intercultural or awareness training for staff. This resulted in a low quality of treatment of patients from migrant backgrounds, "doctor shopping" and in the long run, increasing costs in health care system."

A PROFESSION WHICH BRINGS DIFFERENT WORLDS TOGETHER



TransSPuk students and teachers together

Asylum seekers are perfectly placed to work as cultural and language mediators due to their different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. By creating a qualification in which asylum seekers learn about the German social system and other features of the German society, TransSPuk found an excellent way to not only increase asylum seekers' chances of getting a job and integrating in the Germany society, but also increase the efficiency and decrease costs in the health and social services sectors.

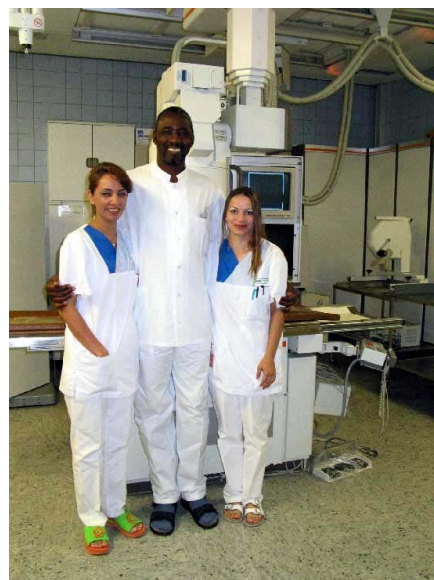
¹ **Transfer von Sprache und Kultur** – Transfer of language and culture

² 'Ein neuer Weg zur Verbesserung der Gesundheitsversorgung von Flüchtlingen und Migranten (New ways to improve health and services for asylum seekers and migrants), conference in Berlin 16-17/6 2004

In Germany asylum seekers are normally not even allowed to participate in job training programmes and it is extremely difficult for them to obtain a work permit which they need to start a job. They may only apply for a work permit after having spent one year in the country, and only under the condition that no German or other EU citizen is available for the job. The requirements for obtaining a job permit make it very difficult for asylum seekers to get employed. The cases where it is possible are mainly when staff with very specific skills or certain language knowledge is needed. The establishment of a new profession 'cultural and language mediator', which combines specific skills and language knowledge paves the way for asylum seekers to not only get a qualification, but also contribute to their new society and assist other asylum seekers.

The qualification developed by TransSPuk starts with two years theoretical education, followed by one-year internships. The education is divided into four different modules, specifically developed to suit the needs of the participants. In these modules, each lasting six months, asylum seekers learnt about Germany's social system and bureaucracy, cultural differences, computing and German language. After each module, the participants receive a certificate. The qualification the asylum seekers achieve is useful not only in Germany, but also in case they return to their home countries.

During practical training they have internships in at least four different places such as social and welfare services, clinics and hospitals. TransSPuk had already established contacts with the communes and institutions where internships took place before the internship phase started, since they needed to ask the communes to sponsor bus trips for the asylum seekers to get to the theoretical education and training. Normally asylum seekers are not allowed to leave the city where they are staying, but the Employment Office in Wuppertal even provided work permissions for the participating asylum seekers to be able to start their internships.



The first day on the job

The cultural and language mediators accompany asylum seekers who need help with interpretation to different social and health services and assist them when they get in touch with German speaking staff. The qualified asylum seekers provide a great resource for the health and social services sectors as they guarantee a good communication between institutions and their foreign clients. Not only do they have excellent language skills, but they also know from their own experience what it is like to come from a different culture. This is of immense help to other asylum seekers. Getting help from someone they trust helps removing barriers to seeking assistance. It also makes the services asylum seekers receive more efficient, which in turn decreases the costs for the society. It also greatly facilitated the integration of asylum seekers in their new society.

The project resulted in an increased awareness of asylum seekers and their needs. Both asylum seekers and staff got to know new cultures and the institutions became more open to other cultures and concepts. In fact, the communes and institutions where asylum seekers undertook internships considered the project so successful that they are now pushing for others to also participate. Some even wanted to involve more asylum seekers and specifically asked for asylum seekers with certain language skills.

“What is exciting about the concept that has been developed is that the competences of asylum seekers with different cultural backgrounds are being utilised” says Dr. Elisabeth Neifer-Dichmann from the Federal Ministry of Economics and Labour. Marie Luise Beck, responsible for migration, refugees and integration in the Federal Ministry said that “The qualification does not only bring with it a structural improvement for the medical services for asylum seekers. It also means that the asylum seekers are looked at as people with potential who bring benefits to our society.”

PARTNERS MAKING THE DIFFERENCE

Varinia Morales, the TransSPuk project manager says “A lot of time has been spent on the project, but the outcomes have been great – when the ball got spinning a lot of positive things came out of it. For instance institutions and communes where asylum seekers made internships started networking between the institutions on their own initiatives since they found the project so important.” Partners which were initially very sceptical about the benefits of the project became increasingly enthusiastic as progress was being made, and actively promoted TransSPuk.

The asylum seekers who participated in the programme had very different cultural as well as educational backgrounds. Most of the students were from crisis regions such as Afghanistan, Kosovo, Sierra Leone and Iran and came to Germany with very traumatic experiences. Being able to get activated and do something useful helped them gain back their self-esteem and self-respect.

The majority of the 27 asylum seekers who participated, were highly educated and had worked as teachers, architects, economists and engineers in their home country before they fled to Germany. One asylum seeker, Amir³, fled to Germany from Iran where he had worked as a school teacher. When he first arrived in Germany eight years ago, he wanted to study, but was not allowed to start. Even though he had wanted to continue working as a teacher, he soon realised that it would not be possible in Germany. Ardeshir says “I have no chance to teach in a school, that is clear. When I came to Germany I wanted to study, but it did not work out. This training is the only thing I can do. I am happy about it, but it is the only thing available for me. And I hope that will change, that other asylum seekers can eventually do other jobs.”

During the students’ on-the-job training period, over 60 internships were concluded in 18 municipalities throughout the Nordrhein Westfalen region. The reactions on the job placements were overwhelming: the cultural and language mediators are currently being used in over 140 different social and healthcare organisations, and the mediators have so far taken care of more than 1300 cases. Several healthcare and social services have already asked about their availability and in 50% of the cases concrete job offers have been put on the table. The university clinic of Hamburg Eppendorf has acknowledged and is certifying the job profile. The DP is concentrating all efforts on obtaining a national vocational recognition in the second round of EQUAL. Deutsche Welle, the German international broadcasting service for radio, TV and Internet recognised the successful approach developed by TransSPuk and has published an article on their website about the project. The article emphasises the need for German authorities to accredit the qualification programme in order for it to become a standard offer to asylum seekers. The DP itself has produced a short film explaining the training programme and the high motivation of asylum seekers to participate.

A TRANSNATIONAL DIALOGUE TO ADDRESS COMMON PROBLEMS

While the legal situation for asylum seekers in Europe varies from country to country, they all face the common problem of integrating into new societies, often with minimal or no support and guidance. TransSPuk is one of six EQUAL Development Partnerships, who came together to form a transnational partnership called Asycult. Even though all of the partner organisations come from different EU countries they all have the common goal of developing new education, training and supporting tools to improve the asylum seekers’ integration process into the new society.



The transnational partners gathering for a meeting in Greece

³ Not his real name.

Asylcult, with a total of six partners from Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Luxembourg, Greece and Italy, is a large transnational partnership. This demands clear working arrangements and good working relations to function well. A large part of Asylcult's activity was therefore dedicated to setting up a realistic work programme, getting to know the other partners and finding out what they were trying to achieve and in which contexts. An obvious advantage was that four of the partners were situated in the northern half of Europe. This made it possible to easily bring together the people working in the different DPs, through the organisation of events, study visits and other face-to-face exchanges. The Dutch partner accepted the challenging task of coordinating Asylcult and for setting up the secretariat for the transnational work.

Partners found the practical exchanges interesting and very useful. They had the chance to discuss different approaches to integrating asylum seekers and found out the limitations and obstacles that their own methods would face in a different context. They compiled their findings in a publication which described, for each country, the educational needs of asylum seekers and the main obstacles faced when they are searching for a job. The publication can serve as a reference document for many other organisations in Europe working with asylum seekers.

The project manager for TransSPuk, Wolfgang Vach-Gonner, says that "The transnational dialogue between partners from different EU countries is of immense value for exchanges of experiences across border and is the building block for European integration. Thanks to EQUAL we have been able to develop products together, understand the differences between the EU countries but also realise that we face common problems, which we are better placed to solve together than one by one."

TransSPuk was one of the first DPs to organise an exchange of trainers for their partners from Luxembourg. German teachers explained to their colleagues from Luxembourg how they had set up the 'cultural and language mediator' training programme, while the teachers from Luxembourg focussed on the courses developed in their country. Some interesting commonalities were discussed. Firstly, language training was at the very heart of both approaches, as mastering the language in a new country is the first step to integration. Both projects also used the European Language Portfolio as a basis of their training. The great advantage of the latter is that asylum seekers receive a certificate which is accepted and recognised in the labour market. Finally, both placed a high focus on what is usually referred to as "soft" results. In a situation where asylum seekers are extremely unsure about their future and do not yet feel at home in a new country, it is essential to encourage them to take charge of their own lives. After all the hardship they have endured, asylum seekers need to regain their self-esteem and self-confidence and feel that the new society is offering them the chance to achieve something.

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Link to [EQUAL database description](#)

A short version of this "Success story" and other "Success stories" are available on the [EQUAL website](#)