

GETTING ASYLUM SEEKERS CONNECTED

The introduction of the dispersal policy in the UK in 1999 forced asylum seekers to 'get up and go', often at very short notice, and relocate to other cities and regions across the UK where the necessary support services to welcome them did not exist at the time. This policy aimed to spread asylum seekers across the country and away from London and the south-east of England and to ease pressure on services in this region. Having arrived in a new place with no one to turn to for advice and help, support workers in London were contacted by asylum seekers requesting assistance and seeking advice about a whole range of concerns. These organisations had to quickly adapt to this situation and find effective ways of getting information and support to where it was needed.

The ASSET UK Development Partnership (www.asset-uk.org.uk), set up under the EQUAL Asylum Seekers programme, has explored how it could help with the social and vocational integration of asylum seekers who have been dispersed to different regions throughout the UK. The partnership is made up of seven voluntary and educational organisations working on the national level such as the Refugee Council, the Basic Skills Agency, LLU+ (formerly the London Language and Literacy Unit), the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM), the Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit (RAGU) at London Metropolitan University and Sheffield College. This is a huge partnership covering a wide range of activities which cater to the vocational and training needs of asylum seekers across the UK to prepare them for entry into the labour market once they receive refugee status.

In response to the challenges presented by the dispersal policy, ASSET UK partners have explored innovative ways of reaching out to asylum seekers no matter where they are and providing them with the information they need through the use of IT tools specially developed and designed with their needs in mind. Two particularly innovative examples are the 'Information for Asylum Seekers' website developed by RAGU and the *Citizenskills* cd-rom and multimedia resource produced by the Basic Skills Agency.

Susan Davenport of RAGU explains how the idea for a website came about: "*When the dispersal policy came into force, staff at RAGU would receive phone calls from people sent to other parts of the UK who were 'lost' and did not know what to do or where to turn to get assistance. Many of the asylum seekers contacting us had professional backgrounds and a good level of English and were looking for professional and vocational support. When this policy was first implemented, there was little support available in other cities. We initially set up a telephone advice system but it was difficult to maintain and the capacity was not sufficient. We had the idea to set up a website because it would be something that everyone could access from anywhere.*"

DEVELOPING INNOVATIVE USER-FRIENDLY RESOURCES

The 'Information for Asylum Seekers' website (www.info-for-asylumseekers.org.uk) developed by RAGU is an innovative user-friendly resource which provides asylum seekers with detailed and up-to-date on-line information which they are sure to find useful when exploring educational and volunteering opportunities in the UK, as well as other information. From the home page, users can choose between seven colour-coded headings which guide them to information on improving their English, understanding the UK education system, getting into further or higher education, how to volunteer, how to prepare for the job market, how to get qualifications and experience recognised, and how to go through the process of re-qualification (for regulated professions such as doctors or architects, etc.). Translated summaries in eight of the most common languages spoken by asylum seekers in the UK are provided for those who do not have a sufficient level of English.

In developing the website, the designers went through a process of reflection and review which included feedback via focus groups of potential users to make sure they were on the right track to providing the most-needed information in the best and most user-friendly way. The first step was to define who the website was meant for. The target audience identified was adult asylum seekers, particularly focusing on those with higher education and professional backgrounds who are not able to access existing services. The website would also provide a complementary resource to existing information services, which could also be used by not only asylum seekers, but also refugees or immigrants and other newcomers to the UK.



Through their daily contact with asylum seekers, RAGU workers already had a good idea of what kind of information they would need. Interviews and questionnaires were also used to find out what kind of information asylum seekers would find particularly useful. Once a preliminary version of the website was ready, feedback was collected from a wide variety of sources, including other ASSET UK partners, libraries, refugee organisations and refugee assisting agencies, English teachers and managers, university staff, advisers, managers of employment services and other RAGU staff to

make improvements to the appearance, contents and usability of the website. Focus groups were also set up to observe how asylum seekers navigate the website, and how it could be made more user-friendly. Once the website was finalised, a wide variety of organisations, agencies and actors were contacted to inform them of the website. To promote the use of the website, eight workshops were held for librarians, English language teachers and training providers.

An asylum seeker who has used the website explains why she has found it helpful: *“I found the website very useful because many asylum seekers don’t know that they can do voluntary work or study while going through the asylum application process. If they use the website, they would find out that they can do these things.”* And a training provider in Liverpool has decided to incorporate the website in his teaching: *“As an initial guidance tool, this website is very useful and I will be promoting it to the students on our courses, especially as part of their IT training.”*

LEARNING ABOUT CITIZENSHIP

Citizenskills, developed by the Basic Skills Agency, another ASSET UK partner, is an innovative multimedia and interactive learning resource which introduces learners of English to specific aspects of UK society and culture. It is meant for teachers and adult learners interested in finding out more about citizenship while improving their English skills. Its main audience is asylum seekers who have been dispersed throughout the UK but it can also be useful to refugees and other newcomers. Teachers of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) are encouraged to use the resource in the classroom and incorporate aspects of it into their lesson plans. *“English language teachers have been targeted for the use of Citizenskills,”* explains Celine Castellino of the Basic Skills Agency, *“because they often find themselves in the position of providing advice to asylum seekers as they come in direct contact with them on a regular basis and are often asked for information or assistance. Also, student support services are not always easily accessible and teachers are often the first, and may be the only source of information for many asylum seekers.”*

The fun and interactive *Citizenskills* cd-rom, featuring colourful graphics, aims to develop communication skills, introduce the practical contexts and challenges of citizenship, and promote the integration and active participation of asylum seekers in their own communities. It invites users to navigate through a virtual community and follow the trajectories of seven imaginary asylum seekers while exploring six main topics which are of particular interest to asylum seekers and other newcomers: housing, health, learning, work, community, and government and law. By clicking on ‘housing’, asylum seekers can find out what to look out for when moving house, how to feel at home in a new neighbourhood, what they need to do when they move in, and how to be a good neighbour. The ‘health’ section offers information on health services available and tips on how to stay healthy and keep safe. Under ‘learning opportunities’, asylum seekers can explore how to make the best of the learning and education options available to them. The section

dedicated to work presents options and opportunities in paid and unpaid work as well as rights and responsibilities. A click on 'community' brings users to information on what their community can offer and ways to get support and advice, as well as how they can become involved in their community. The section on 'government and law' highlights how the government works on national and local levels.

Each of the six main thematic sections also include a teachers' section featuring sample lesson plans and suggestions for activities on how to adapt the exercises to suit the language levels of learners. It includes references to citizenship and English language skills that learners could focus on. The cd-rom also includes an interactive game or 'scene builder' which allows users to create conversations, which is a fun and interactive way to put their English skills into practice. The resource includes a booklet with additional activities for learners and a set of guidance notes for teachers. The *Citizenskills* website (www.citizenskills.co.uk) includes links to relevant websites and organisations on the theme of citizenship.

The Basic Skills Agency commissioned BBC Worldwide Interactive Learning to produce the *Citizenskills* resource. The content was inspired by the programme of study on UK society and civic structures, recommended for persons applying for British citizenship, by the 'Life in the United Kingdom' Advisory Group in their report entitled 'The New and the Old'. Four ESOL teachers contributed learning activities and teacher guidance. Once a preliminary version of the cd-rom was ready, focus groups were organised and held with asylum seekers to 'test' the resource and ask for their feedback and comments. ESOL teachers, librarians, and advisers attended presentations and workshops to familiarise them with the resource. An ESOL teachers' workshop lead to additional materials being produced for the accompanying booklet.

SHOWCASING LEARNING TOOLS TO OTHERS

As part of Action 3 of the EQUAL programme relating to mainstreaming strategies, RAGU and the Basic Skills Agency organised joint showcasing events in six cities across the UK to present the Information for Asylum Seekers website and *Citizenskills* resource package to educational institutions and resource centres. They decided to do this jointly in order to combine and maximise resources and reach a wider audience. The aim was to introduce the two innovative resources and explain how they could be used in the classroom. This also provided an opportunity for partners and participants to network and identify useful referrals and contacts for specialist information and websites. An English language teacher who attended a session in Medway, Kent was enthusiastic about these tools developed for asylum seekers by the ASSET UK partnership: *"This has given me answers to a lot of the questions I have been asked by my students. I shall now know where to look for further information. I'm sure these ICT resources will be of great use."*



ASSET UK partners have also travelled to Lithuania, Slovenia and Estonia to present the results of the partnership and showcase its products, including the Information for Asylum Seekers website and *Citizenskills* resource, to organisations working with asylum seekers and refugees who have recently established EQUAL partnerships in these countries.

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