

WORKSHOP A3: TAKING ACCOUNT OF ALL LEARNING

1. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The assessment and validation of skills of people in work give them control of their own career development. Beneficiaries feel empowered and gain self-confidence. They also become more motivated and productive. Assessment and validation of skills help companies to become more aware of their employees' potential, to invest more effectively in human capital and to become more competitive. It is recommended that the main focus of the assessments will be placed on the individuals, and not on the processes and systems.

The assessment and validation of skills of people excluded from the labour market, such as asylum seekers, empowers individuals and helps them to discover their own value in the new society. In return, the local community becomes aware of the potential of the newcomers. It is recommended that skills audits become a practical component of the Common European Asylum System and an integral first step of the reception processes in the Member States.

2. ISSUES

The workshop focused on the assessment and validation of learning and skills of two groups of people:

1. Assessing and validating the skills of people in work, who have acquired their skills informally, "on-the-job", and need to improve their employability;
2. Assessing and validating the skills of people excluded from the labour market, who have difficulty proving their skills and experience, such as asylum seekers, migrants and ethnic minorities.

The chair, Paul-Eerik Rummo, Minister of Population and Ethnic Affairs in Estonia, introduced the Workshop panel, composed of advocates of good practices in relation to these issues, developed within EQUAL, and of potential users of these practices. He also introduced the facilitator of the session, Mary Braithwaite.

He stated that, in contrast to formal training, informal and non-formal learning were still heavily underestimated and not officially recognised. Such lack of recognition disempowered employees and led to low career aspirations, as well as an increased risk of exclusion and marginalisation. Employers were, on the other hand, often unaware of their staff skills and, thus, unable to make rational and cost-effective decisions on their investments in human capital, which, in turn, affected their competitiveness.

The chair further commented that there was a lack of appropriate tools and mechanisms to recognise and assess skills and qualifications of those who are very marginalized in the labour market. In addition, asylum seekers and migrants workers faced even bigger challenges, because their skills were not always clearly relevant to the new country's labour market (due to inadequate language skills) and the difficulties of having skills assessed and recognised.

2.1. ISSUE 1: ASSESSING AND VALIDATING THE SKILLS OF PEOPLE IN WORK, GAINED THROUGH INFORMAL LEARNING

The good practice

Rigo van Raai, from the Empowerment Centre EVC in the Netherlands, explained how self-assessment helped employees to better understand their vocational strengths, opportunities and weaknesses, in terms of competences already gained and those needing further development. The assessments enabled employers to understand to what extent and what type of training was required. Rigo mentioned three examples of successful self-assessments:

- A self-assessment test developed for a specific unit within a bakery, costing around 30,000 euro but clearly being paid off through its results: 4-5% increase in productivity

compared to other units, halved sickness rate and highly motivated and satisfied workers.

- Portfolio development in a nursing home where aspirant nurses could get their experiences as a caretaker validated by logging on their daily activities and through group sessions to further register their skills and competencies and to identify further training needs. Compared with formal training, the procedure was very cost-effective (258 euro per participant) and strongly benefited those who would have had great difficulties to achieve the certificate in a formal classroom environment. Additional "soft" impacts included increased empowerment and self-confidence of all participants, and higher motivation to pursue further personal development.
- Individualised portfolio development for unemployed, developed by the social department within a municipality in the Netherlands, to make beneficiaries aware of the skills and competencies they possessed without knowing about them.

All these examples showed how individuals discovered their potential and value, even through non-work related experiences. Overall, people felt more self-confident and appreciated, which in the majority of cases led to increased productivity. Workers were also encouraged to pursue further education and training. Two of the examples described by the EQUAL advocate had won awards.

The debate

The first potential user, Eddy Donders from the Flemish Public Employment Service VDAB, was interested in the policy context in the Netherlands regarding the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL). His country, Belgium, strongly supported APL but the procedures were very complicated and required partnerships between a high number of different institutions. He also queried the extent to which the Netherlands had implemented the Copenhagen recommendations stating that validation should be a right of every individual.

Rigo van Raai responded that some sectors had legally recognised this right in their collective agreements, but that in others no such opportunities existed. His own organisation, the Empowerment Centre, had adopted the Copenhagen recommendations by emphasising that organisations could only be empowered if they focused on the individuals and not on the systems surrounding them, and that assessments changed the way people looked at themselves and at their position in the society.

Eddy Donders then asked whether the training institutions were receptive to the new practices developed. In a sense, they were losing clients through the certification of skills via validation route. Rigo van Raai indicated that the situation was improving and that there was increased awareness that for some people formal training would not work.

Sue Waddington, representing the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), queried whether such low-cost assessment and validation procedures did not encourage employers to limit formal education and training investments and to lose sight of the overall objectives of lifelong learning. To this, Rigo van Raai replied that in the case of the nursery home, the costs were only reduced thanks to hard negotiations and that at the time, there was an enormous demand for skills, which justified the procedures followed.

A representative from the City of Munich described a local project which, in partnership with employers, helped immigrant nurses to enter the Bavarian formal education system. They also used a portfolio to recognise skills and competencies gained through prior experience. Rigo van Raai commented that formal recognition for access to the education and training systems was still an issue in the Netherlands.

A participant from a Dutch organisation representing the social partners informed the session that currently a total of 140 collective work agreements were being renegotiated in the Netherlands and that it seemed that employers were no longer willing to include APL as they considered it too expensive. Also, trade unions preferred to negotiate higher wages instead of allocating financial resources to other human capital investments.

Rigo van Raai concurred but mentioned that the trade unions should be well aware that there is an increasing need for certification of informal skills, especially as people become older. APL is a cost-effective way of ensuring this. By using APL, employers were sometimes afraid that staff might request pay rises or leave the company, but companies should be aware that in order to

become more competitive, they have to develop their staff. In addition, less and less people stay in the same job for a long period.

Sue Waddington wondered how transferable the experiences of the Empowerment Centre's were. She also drew attention to the work currently being undertaken by DG Education and Culture, which were preparing common principles for validation of prior learning. To this, Eddy Donders added that in Belgium efforts were being made to develop common definitions for job standards so that APL providers had concrete indicators to measure against. Rigo was confident that the portfolios could be easily applied elsewhere and in different schemes, but he emphasised the need to properly train staff implementing the assessments, as they needed to be absolutely clear on the scope and method of the tests, leaving the individual in full control.

2.2. ISSUE 2: ASSESSING AND VALIDATING THE SKILLS OF PEOPLE EXCLUDED FROM THE LABOUR MARKET, SUCH AS MIGRANTS AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

The good practice

Sue Waddington presented the results and outcomes of several EQUAL partnerships which developed skills audits for asylum seekers. She first described how the EU was experiencing demographic ageing and skills shortages, which were affecting the Lisbon strategy goals to increase levels of skills and labour market participation. Migration to the EU could be seen as one element which could contribute to meeting some of the EU's current and future labour market needs, especially when considering that since 1990 more than 5 million people applied for asylum in the EU. Sue commented that the reception of asylum seekers varied, but the majority were not legally permitted to enter the labour market. The waiting period to determine if they could remain ranged from a few months to several years, which often left asylum seekers feeling isolated and powerless, unable to contribute to the society.

Several EQUAL partnerships in the Asylum Seekers Theme developed, tested and applied new methods and tools to assess, value and recognise the prior competences and skills of asylum seekers. A transnational working group of 5 projects from 5 different Member States was created to share experience and draw lessons from the different approaches to skills audits carried out by the projects. Sue emphasised that an important step towards the social and vocational integration of asylum seekers and other newcomers was the recognition of the individual's skills and qualifications. This was a difficult task, as many asylum seekers had non-formal skills or could not provide certificates from studies and verification from previous employment.

Sue stressed that the primary objective of a skills audit was to help the individual realise future work-related opportunities in the host country. Through the skills audit process, asylum seekers recognised their own value during a very anxious period in their lives, developed a CV and action plan enabling them to build upon their skills and were encouraged to set out a route into appropriate learning opportunities or into employment or other type of work experiences. The local community benefited because asylum seekers were more actively involved through, for example, volunteering in schools and hospitals. Employers benefited as they became more familiar with the skills of asylum seekers and increasingly considered them as a good potential source of recruits.

The outcomes of the transnational efforts were presented in the guide "Skills Audits with Asylum Seekers: the basics". The document contends that the costs of undertaking skills audits at an early stage outweigh the costs of failed integration subsequently. Even if asylum seekers return to their country of origin, the costs should be seen as a contribution to rebuilding lives in countries where skills for development are needed. It was, therefore, recommended that skills audits be carried out as soon as possible with all asylum seekers and be considered an integral part of the reception process.

The debate

Dagmar Beer-Kern, Federal Government Commissioner for migration, refugees and integration in Germany, confirmed the importance of undertaking skills audits for newcomers, as they had the double effect of benefiting both the beneficiary and the host society. She further commented that skills audits contributed to a better personal and vocational development of individuals and helped them to deal with the long waiting times. She also noted that the audits helped to reduce discrimination. Dagmar wondered how Sue's project had dealt with the identification of skills and competencies, and especially of soft skills, obtained in an often very different cultural / national

context, and how they had managed to link these to existing education and training programmes. She also queried whether the results obtained through the transnational work could be applied to other disadvantaged groups, and used by Public Employment Services.

Gustav Fridolin, the Member of the Swedish Parliament, emphasised that all people should be considered as a resource, and that it was important to look at their individual assets. This was, however, not a general attitude found amongst decision makers who considered asylum a matter of “burden sharing”, and discussed integration only in terms of problems and obstacles. He asked Sue Waddington why, in her view, it was so difficult to change such attitudes.

Sue Waddington first commented on the importance of helping people to gain soft, informal skills, especially in the work environment. Different societies have different customs and concepts for daily life situations. For this purpose, she emphasised that the involvement of asylum seekers and refugees in developing assessments and courses for their peers had been essential. She did not believe that Public Employment Services were best placed to deal with assessing the skills and competencies of asylum seekers, as this required substantial preparation and training. When discussing the negative stereotyping of asylum seekers and migrants in general, Sue agreed that this was a major problem and very difficult to combat. In her view, it would be most effective to use people to speak up about their experiences in public and to the media.

Eddy Donders indicated that his organisation also developed a project for the integration of asylum seekers and that they worked with the NERIC system for recognition of diplomas and certificates. They developed a practical, non-language dependent test for identifying the skills of technical workers, such as electricians.

A representative of the Institute for Labour Market in Portugal commented that the EQUAL experiences should challenge the Member States, and in particular their employment services, to look at the different approaches to address assessment and validation of prior learning. In Portugal, the Ministry, in collaboration with the social partners, has been working since 2000 on APL. Another Portuguese participant added that local authorities played an essential role in assessing skills and competencies of newcomers, as they, in most countries, were directly responsible for their reception. She also mentioned that under Round 2 of EQUAL, increased focus would be placed on collecting and coordinating all assessment tools and instruments developed for different disadvantaged groups, with the final aim of integrating them into the policy framework.

Dagmar Beer-Kern stated that in Germany, the public image of asylum seekers was extremely bad, as they were all considered lower-skilled illiterates. She emphasised that asylum seekers should be encouraged to speak up and share their experiences with a wider audience. She also considered that the use of tools such as the skills audits helped to further improve awareness of the benefits newcomers could bring to society.

Gustav Fridolin argued that, in order to integrate the EQUAL experiences, radical changes should be made to national and EU policy frameworks. Asylum seekers should not be separated from labour immigration and should be allowed to choose between the two different application processes.

Rigo van Raai stated that assessments and skills audits were all about giving the power to the individual, and that they should be guided to improve their personal and vocational development.

Sue Waddington recommended that skills audits become a practical component of the EU's Common European Asylum System.

The chair finished the debate by thanking the panellists and the audience for their participation. He concluded the workshop session by stating that the experiences discussed formed an excellent basis for the further work of identifying and transferring best practices between the Member States.