

THE RIGHT OPPORTUNITY FOR THE RIGHT SKILLS: EQUAL PROMOTES SKILLS AUDITS WITH ASYLUM-SEEKERS

OVERCOMING THE ASYLUM-SEEKER STEREOTYPE

When asylum-seekers arrive in the EU, a key step towards their integration into the host country's labour force is the recognition of their individual skills and qualifications. This process is, however, not straightforward, as many asylum-seekers have non-formal skills or are unable to provide certificates or proof of former studies, employment or relevant life experience, due to the circumstances in which they had to leave their home country.

There is a lack of appropriate tools or mechanisms that take into account the specific situation of asylum-seekers. Some skills may not be clearly relevant to the host country labour market, and most asylum-seekers do not have an adequate grasp of the host country language. This may make the assessment of their skills and their integration into the labour market harder than for many other groups, which has negative implications for both the individual asylum-seeker, who becomes de-skilled and demotivated, and the host society, which misses out on potential human resources that could contribute to the labour market.

Legislative constraints in certain EU countries and the lack of skills and qualifications assessment tools for asylum-seekers means that employers are unable to recognise that asylum-seekers may have work experiences and qualifications that are unavailable, or difficult to find, in the domestic market. They are therefore hesitant to provide them with work opportunities, resulting in stereotyping of and discrimination against asylum-seekers.

MATCHING ASYLUM-SEEKERS SKILLS WITH LABOUR MARKET NEEDS

EU faces shortage of labour

Since 1990, the EU has received more than 5 million asylum-seekers, or the equivalent of a small-sized Member State. During this time, the 15 EU Member States have received an average of 14 asylum-seekers per 1,000 inhabitants, and the 10 new Member States received over 37,000 asylum applications in 2003 - an increase on previous years.

The changing demographic situation in the EU is and will increasingly cause skills and labour shortages and competition for certain (mainly higher) skills. The EU is characterised by fluctuating demands for labour, both in terms of sectoral needs and regional disparities. Member States have started to devise schemes at national level to encourage the arrival of certain categories of workers, but are facing problems in identifying and attracting the persons that have the rights skills. Many asylum seekers have skills and qualifications that could bring social and economic benefits, or address shortages, but these are often not recognised. A skills-auditing process could help identify their relevant skills and match them to those needed in the EU labour market.

The EU's changing overall economic and social context is characterised by skills and labour shortages, competition for the highly skilled and accelerated ageing. It is estimated that even in the case of moderate migration, demographic ageing will cause the EU-25 working age population to fall from 303 to 297 million by 2020, and to 280 million by 2030. Such a fall will have a strong impact on the Member States' welfare systems but many of those requesting protection have skills and qualifications that could bring social and economic benefits, or address skills' shortages. However, the skills of asylum-seekers may initially be difficult to apply in the host country, especially if their qualifications have not been recognised. A skills-auditing process, can identify the skills asylum-seekers have and match them to those needed in the EU labour market.

EU supports integration of migrant workers

Since the launch of the European Employment Strategy (EES) in 1997, Member States have signed up to promoting the integration of disadvantaged groups (including migrant workers and ethnic minorities), combating discrimination and attracting more people to the labour market.

Although asylum-seekers are not formally included in the Strategy, the fact that they are specifically addressed by EQUAL, makes them a target group for consideration.

Another important policy development affecting asylum-seekers is the Social Inclusion Process, and all EU Member States support activity within the Asylum-Seekers Theme in their EQUAL programmes. This Theme specifically promotes the socio-vocational integration of asylum-seekers, which can be enhanced by the application of skills audits. Around one quarter of the 61 EQUAL partnerships in Round 2 are developing, testing and applying tools to recognise, value and assess the skills and abilities of asylum seekers. Many of the Development Partnerships and even Transnational Partnerships that are working with skills assessments are building on the experience gained by the transnational working group of six Round 1 EQUAL partnerships on skills audits established on October 2003..

A Common European Asylum System (CEAS), based on a full and inclusive application of the 1951 UN Geneva Convention relating to the status of refugees, was put forward by the 1999 Tampere European Council. The Tampere conclusions and the Treaty of Amsterdam set a five-year timeframe for work on the adoption of legislative and other instruments setting minimum standards and measures on EU asylum policy, including the Directive on minimum standards on the reception of asylum-seekers (adopted in January 2003). The experience of the application of skills audits for asylum-seekers is particularly relevant to the implementation of this Directive and, in particular, to Articles 11 and 12 relating to access to employment and to vocational training. Skills audits can be applied in the different contexts of the EU Member States. By making the host society aware of the potential of asylum-seekers and by promoting their vocational integration, the application of skills audits strongly illustrates the benefits of exceeding the minimum standards of the Reception Directive.

CAREERS ADVICE FOR DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

Factors that can make a difference - a good career portfolio

Outcomes of the skills audits include the production of a CV or a 'portfolio', which is owned and developed by the asylum-seeker and can be presented to employers and education and training organisations. In many of the asylum-seekers' countries of origin, CVs are not as commonly used as they are in the EU, which means that the benefits and purpose of creating a CV are clarified during the skills audits process. The individual portfolio is more comprehensive than a normal CV since it seeks to explain the background to any skills gained in the asylum-seeker's country of origin and sets these within the context of the host country. The portfolio can be used in a job interview and helps to demonstrate the skills possessed by the asylum-seeker. This is particularly important in those cases where the asylum-seeker does not have formal qualifications from former study or work experience, but can instead demonstrate relevant skills gained through other practices and interests, for example, community work.

Through the development of a CV or portfolio, the skills audit process can offer asylum-seekers access to relevant education, training, volunteering, employment or other forms of work experiences, such as traineeships or work-shadowing. This benefits the host society and reduces the 'costs' of inactivity and alienation of asylum-seekers since they are integrated into the host society and their potential is used. Skills audits also empower the individuals concerned, regardless of their future or the outcome of their asylum application.

In general, skills audits highlight the many skills of asylum-seekers, which means that prejudices can be broken down, and the interests and problems of asylum-seekers can be drawn to public attention. Moreover, because of partnership building, there is increased involvement between the asylum-seekers and the public in the host society, which raises overall community awareness.

Around 30% of the Development Partnerships in the Asylum-Seekers Theme have been involved in the development, testing and application of tools to recognise, value and assess the skills and abilities of asylum-seekers. The following has been observed:

- During the skills audits, each participant constructed a personal profile (CV or portfolio), which helped asylum-seekers to understand their position within the labour market, what skills were needed, any skills gaps, and what the best future options/opportunities are.
- The skills audits made access to education and training resources or to the labour market easier, and improved a good match between the asylum-seeker and opportunities.

- When participants found work, skills audits contributed directly to reduced public costs and welfare aid.
- Skills audits favoured integration into the host society as an outcome of accessing relevant education, training or employment.

Skills audit tests - what they reveal

A number of the Development Partnerships involved in the Asylum-Seekers theme, representing close to 15% of the total projects involved in the theme, formed a transnational working group on Skills Audits in October 2003 to identify their success factors and good practices from Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Together, they applied skills audits to over 1,000 participants. They looked at the different Skills Audit processes that had been developed, assessed the costs and benefits, developed questionnaires and undertook case studies focusing on individual asylum-seekers who had undergone a skills audit^[1]. The following emerged from their work:

Successful audits require careful planning

Skills audits could be an integrated process forming part of wider programmes that provide asylum-seekers with orientation support, counselling, education, training and access to work or work experiences and constitute an essential element in achieving their integration. The Development Partnerships identified seven common "key steps" for a successful audit process, namely:

- A thorough **selection of participants** to ensure that they are motivated and willing to take part in an often lengthy exercise;
- **Initial interviews** - as a first introduction to skills audits to understand the asylum-seeker's expectations, ambitions and background;
- The actual **identification of 'soft' and 'hard' skills/qualifications/competencies/work experience/language comprehension**;
- **Validation** and "translation" of skills and qualifications into certificates valid in the host country;
- Recording and presentation of a written portfolio or CV;
- **Matching options and opportunities** with education/training systems and the labour market; and
- **Follow-up** of direct and indirect benefits, in addition to any costs and drawbacks.

Skills audits are cost-effective

Skills audits are resource intensive but the benefits outweigh the costs. On average, EQUAL partners estimated that costs for undertaking a skills audit ranged from 200-1,000 euro per person (including material and human resources), but the following costs were reduced: counselling, and reception and allowances when asylum-seekers become self-sufficient.

Asylum-seekers also benefited from intercultural learning, increasing awareness and understanding.

The evidence clearly shows that the application of skills audits shortly upon arrival, enabled host countries to benefit from the asylum-seeker becoming self-supporting in a legal way faster than might otherwise have been the case.

Skills audits increase motivation and integration

Skills audits made it possible for asylum-seekers to focus on the future whilst they were waiting for the outcome of the asylum application. The individual case studies mentioned in the Skills Audit guide demonstrated that:

- Asylum-seekers regained confidence and were encouraged to develop new personal goals and missions.
- They were also able to begin appropriate professional training within a relatively short-time period.

This meant that the skills audit process helped both to reduce the dangers of inactivity and to support the integration and empowerment process.

The skills audit process: a good mediator between asylum-seekers and employers

Creating networks and partnerships involving private companies and employer organisations is key to a successful skills audit. Through the skills audit process employers:

- Discovered the benefits asylum-seekers could bring to their activities;
- Were much more open to offering asylum-seekers work opportunities and (voluntary) job placements; and
- Were in some cases initially reluctant, but in the end offered asylum-seekers a job after their placement or, where this was not possible due to legislative restrictions, enthusiastically argued for an extension of the placement.

Skills audits enhance awareness and involvement

The first outcomes emerging from EQUAL suggest that skills audits have resulted in reduced racism and xenophobia in the local community because of the successful integration of asylum-seekers. There is no evidence of the provision of skills audits attracting 'bogus' asylum-seekers, although this could only be properly assessed once these tools are applied on a much larger scale than the current level. Organisations outside EQUAL, such as education and training institutes and referral agencies, are showing interest in these approaches and the potential to adapt them for other disadvantaged groups.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

EU policy actors: European Commission, European Parliament and Member States.

- The application of skills audits for asylum-seekers could form a practical component of the Common European Asylum System.
- Skills audits for asylum-seekers work in different national and regional contexts across the EU and the practices are already being mainstreamed nationally.

National/regional/ local authorities and employers

- The benefits of skills audits for asylum-seekers outweigh the costs. It is especially cost-effective to undertake skills audits shortly after the arrival of the asylum-seeker in the host country following an application for asylum, as they ensure that human and financial resources are not wasted.
- The effectiveness of integrated programmes offered to asylum-seekers, providing a combination of language courses, educational/vocational training, introduction to the labour market and on-the-job training could be enhanced if skills audits were an integral part of them. As a skills audit is intended to help participants identify the skills that they already have and the best education or professional route to pursue, it should be undertaken as a first phase of the programme. Resources should be put in place to ensure that appropriate capacity exists to deliver skills audits.
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- The Operational Programmes and project that will be supported by the European Social Fund 2007 - 2013 could include measures to promote the use of skills audits for asylum seekers and other newcomers.

Endnotes

[1] The Working Group created a guide "[Skills Audits - The Basics: Working with Asylum Seekers](#)", which outlines the skills audit process for asylum seekers, building on aspects of the good practices and practical experiences of the partnerships. The guide provides an overview over common steps for undertaking a skills audit, case studies, practical advice for setting up a

skills audits, descriptions of and contact information to the specific projects. In addition, a brochure, CD and other exhibition material was prepared by the group for the European Conference "Asylum Seekers in the EU: the Challenges of Integration" held in Dublin on 1st April 2004. The importance and relevance of validating the skills of asylum seekers has not only been recognised by Development Partnerships, but also at transnational level. The PASSI (Transnational Partnership PASSI (Prepare Asylum Seekers and Society for Integration) involves Partnerships from five Member States, namely Italy (Orizzonti), Malta (Asylum Seekers Partnership), Portugal (VIAAS), Greece (Ακτινέργια) and Germany (Arbeit und Bildung International). As part of the common activities developed in the Transnational Partnership, a common model for Evaluation and Validation of Competences/Skills (EVC model) is being developed. The validity of the model will be tested in the different contexts and cultures of the EQUAL partners.