

PATHWAYS TO INTEGRATION AND (RE-ENTRY) INTO EMPLOYMENT FOR DISADVANTAGED PEOPLE

GOOD PRACTICE AND STRATEGIC LESSONS FROM EQUAL

*This document has been prepared as part of a series of papers on **Strategic Lessons from the Employability Strand of EQUAL**. The main purpose of these papers is to underpin and help to focus **transnational cooperation within the framework of the European Social Fund (ESF)**, as a means of promoting EQUAL principles and of mainstreaming EQUAL approaches that can be directly related to the new ESF priorities for action.*

These Strategic Lessons seek to highlight, from a European perspective, what has already been achieved by EQUAL in relation to the new ESF thematic priorities and to demonstrate those EQUAL approaches that have a potential for wider transfer within the Union. They could thus be helpful to those who are running, or are planning to set up, transnational networks in one of the thematic priority fields of the ESF.

This document summarises outcomes from EQUAL Development Partnerships (DPs), transnational and national thematic networks that have been concerned with developing pathways for disadvantaged people to successful vocational and social integration. There are links from this lead text to three annexes on designing pathways for three important EQUAL target groups namely:

- (Ex)-offenders;
- People with disabilities; and
- Immigrants and ethnic minorities.

This document and all of its three annexes include annotated references to the EU policy context and relevant background material from EQUAL experience that can be accessed on-line through hyperlinks.¹ For off-line use, a complete dossier, including the four texts and all relevant reference material, can be downloaded from:

http://circa.europa.eu/Public/irc/empl/equal_etg/library?l=/etg1/04_examples/integration_disadvantage . .

1. THE ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT OF DISADVANTAGED PEOPLE - A CHALLENGE FOR EMPLOYMENT POLICIES IN THE EU

Access to employment and social inclusion are priorities for the intervention of the [European Social Fund](#) (ESF) for the period 2007 to 2013.² Specifically, the ESF finances the following types of activities:

- Counselling and training that is adapted to the specific needs of disadvantaged and disabled people;
- Providing pathways for integration and entry into employment, and job creation for disadvantaged and disabled people in the social economy;
- Support for the entrepreneurship of disadvantaged and disabled people;
- Awareness campaigns to fight discrimination, change attitudes and promote diversity in the workplace.

¹ Text elements that include hyperlinks are underlined.

² See Article 3 of the [Regulation \(EC\) No 1081/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council](#) of 5 July 2006.

All four of these activities are reflected in the practices of EQUAL DPs that are reported later in this document.

By promoting such action, the ESF offers practical support for the implementation of the [Guidelines](#) of the [European Employment Strategy](#) which stress that “*particular attention must also be paid to significantly reducing employment gaps for people at a disadvantage, including disabled people.*” Such ESF support can also assist the implementation of the [Lisbon Strategy](#) for growth and jobs that provides overarching objectives and guidelines for EU policy in a number of strongly interrelated fields and that encompasses in its targets a significant reduction in the unemployment gaps for people at a disadvantage by 2010.

The overall socio-economic context of the EU is characterised by skill and labour shortages which are increasingly noticeable in a number of sectors. Moreover, in just a few years, the accelerating demographic ageing of the European population will result in a shrinking of the EU's workforce. Both these factors will have negative effects on economic growth. European societies must therefore ensure that the talents and potential of all of their citizens are fully mobilised, in order to effectively address the problems which European economies are likely to experience.

Increasing the participation of disadvantaged people in employment also underpins measures by Member States which are closely in line with the objectives of the European Union related to [Active Inclusion](#) and the [Inclusion of Vulnerable Groups](#). The fight against discrimination and social exclusion constitutes a complementary approach to ‘classical’ employment policy which concentrates on ensuring that work pays, as well as on removing unemployment, poverty and inactivity traps.

2. THE NATURE OF PATHWAYS

An integration pathway approach, which is the theme explored in this document, starts from the explicit recognition that those who are hit first, most frequently and longest by unemployment are people who are often several times disadvantaged through an accumulation of different factors, such as lack of skills or experience, housing problems, cultural minority status, poverty and social marginalisation. Individuals affected by these factors realise that they are in a vulnerable position but in most cases they cannot clearly distinguish between their different needs for training, health care, financial support or guidance and information. This is reinforced by the fact that many of the agencies and services to which they turn for help operate in narrowly predetermined fields of responsibility that can only provide partial responses to their overall situation or to the set of needs that they present.

Integration pathways aim to guide disadvantaged people towards the labour market. However, the main innovative aspect lies in providing, at a local level, a low threshold, entry point to a multi-stage integration process that may take place at several levels, linking and matching the needs and interests of these vulnerable people to different, hitherto separate services and offering individualised support and follow up. Pathways draw on the whole range of resources that can be mobilised in a local or territorial context and can offer flexible responses to the needs of very different groups including people with disabilities, immigrants and ethnic minorities and (ex)-offenders.

EQUAL adapted the features of these structured pathways to particular target groups and local labour markets. The pathways included a series of stages, which were given different emphases depending on needs and opportunities. Participants progressed through a structured menu of opportunities for information, guidance and counselling, pre-training, vocational training, assistance in career planning and job search, work placements and help with socially valuable activities. Such pathways offered a flexible approach in which participants were empowered to assess and orient their own progress and to draw strength from each other, whilst public services, employers and organisations in the integration chain were encouraged to make a contribution within a structured partnership process.

3. COMMON FEATURES IN PATHWAYS

The effectiveness of pathways depends on being able to maintain quality standards whilst offering maximum flexibility to foster responsibility, commitment and progress towards social, cultural and vocational integration. The resultant pathways are as diverse as the circumstances of the target groups and the local labour markets but a number of key features can be identified.

KEY FEATURES OF INTEGRATION PATHWAYS FOR DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

DESIGNING THE PATHWAY

INITIAL CONTACT, SUPPORT AND MOTIVATION

- Reaching out to potential participants through local associations and agencies;
- Providing assistance with child care, housing, money management, health and other problems as required.

EMPOWERMENT

- Listening to participants' needs and aspirations and trying to understand cultural values;
- Legitimising prior knowledge and skills;
- Providing information on the local labour market and related services;
- Generating capacities and opportunities to participate in decision-making at project-level and in the local community.

TRAINING AND EDUCATION

- Offering pre-training in basic communication skills (language, literacy, numeracy, interaction, teamwork);
- Offering training in IT;
- Designing training suited to learners;
- Providing training in skills that are in demand on the local labour market;
- Developing career planning skills.

EMPLOYMENT

- Establishing practical cooperation with employers and their organisations;
- Involving employers in the training process;
- Assisting with the adaptation of recruitment practices;
- Negotiating the conditions and expected outcomes of work placements;
- Providing direct support during placements;
- Offering guidance or training to supervisors/mentors, personnel officers and trade union representatives;
- Encouraging the subsequent employment of trainees.

ON-GOING SUPPORT

VOCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Building in regular self-assessment of progress;
- Evaluating and recording learning outcomes;

- Formalising the record of achievement;
- Supporting personal career planning.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

- Facilitating a more stable home and family environment;
- Providing information on citizens' rights and responsibilities;
- Encouraging commitment as an active citizen.

CEMENTING THE PATHWAY TOGETHER

- Reviewing potential partners and identifying the mutual benefit of their participation;
- Maintaining formal or informal contact with sources of expertise or influence;
- Developing multi-disciplinary approaches;
- Making time to explore differences in professional roles and ethics;
- Focusing on changing priorities and practices within the participating organisations.

3.1. DESIGNING THE PATHWAY

Isolation, lack of self-confidence and poor communication skills all need to be overcome. However, information on available opportunities may fail to reach disadvantaged people through formal channels and so the first contact can often happen through neighbourhood groups and associations, leisure services, school-related activities, local citizen information bureaux, or even through their peers.

Empowerment and ownership are at the core of the pathways approach. The pathway involves the development of both the capacity and opportunity to play a full role in society and in economic activity and to become more empowered. Participants must build up their confidence, acquire new knowledge and skills and exercise choice – all within the context of the staged learning along the pathway. Ownership relies on the ability of those professionals who are involved in the design process to listen to the participant's needs and aspirations and to understand their cultural values. On that basis, it is possible to determine how to legitimise prior experience and skills, provide essential information to help the participant cope better with day to day life and to involve him or her in making the crucial decisions about the stages along the pathway.

3.2. EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Skills development is a core element of all integration pathways. It can include opportunities for basic skills training, vocational training and training to work in different sectors. Learning requires teaching techniques that capitalise on the previous experience of trainees, overcome attention-span difficulties and take account of family responsibilities, limited income or mobility and cultural background. New information and communication technology is generally less accessible to vulnerable groups and many EQUAL DPs included an introduction to computers as part of the offer of basic skills development with new technology often being used as a training tool.

3.3. EMPLOYMENT

As part of the integrated pathway approach, EQUAL DPs either provided on-the-job training or negotiated work placements to complement a course of study. Reluctance on the part of employers to offer placements to vulnerable groups can be overcome by building trust in the skills and reliability of the trainees and facilitating access to a range of services that offer support to employers and their supervisors. A successful placement is one that leads to subsequent employment and enhances the enterprise's image as being a socially responsible employer. The direct involvement of employers or employers' organisations was the key to success for many EQUAL DPs that worked with disadvantaged groups.

A small but significant number of EQUAL projects have experimented successfully in training members of vulnerable groups to set up their own enterprises or to become self-employed. This autonomous route is one way of avoiding the prejudice or stereotyping of employers or work colleagues in the search for an acceptable and economically-viable form of work.

3.4. SUPPORT

Follow-up support in work placements or during the first employment contract is an effective way of ensuring that individuals do not become discouraged as they encounter new challenges in working life. With the growth of part-time and short-term contracts, new skills are often also required to manage budgets, time and family responsibilities.

Follow-up is also needed to ensure that the individual remains in control of any previous or potential problems related to family, health, housing or finance. Through such support, the individual also becomes more aware of his or her rights and entitlements and can be encouraged to play a more positive role in the local community, often in conjunction with other project participants.

3.5. CEMENTING THE PATHWAY TOGETHER

Perhaps the most important challenge in implementing this type of action lies in coordinating and networking all the relevant agencies and actors, both formal and informal, in order to provide a coherent and transparent range of accessible services and opportunities. The failure to meet this challenge is one of the main reasons why there are still relatively few examples of comprehensive pathway strategies being adopted in the delivery of local active employment policies. Many formal institutions and agencies have little experience of cooperative working between departments or with actors outside their institutional framework. This lack of experience can seriously restrict their 'field of vision' and range of activity, thus limiting their effectiveness and efficiency. Fortunately, the partnership principle of EQUAL has produced many positive examples of cooperation. DPs have developed new ways of managing cooperation between partners as diverse as schools, training providers, guidance services, employers, placement agencies, social services, youth organisations, voluntary bodies and community interest groups, within the context of a multi-agency network.

EQUAL has also shown how the training of trainers and other front-line professionals improves their effectiveness in integrating vulnerable groups. With a more specialist understanding of the constraints and opportunities faced by disadvantaged groups, professionals have become more able to help them take responsibility for their own futures.

4. SOME CONCLUSIONS FOR ESF OP DESIGNERS AND IMPLEMENTERS

The considerable resources that have been allocated by the ESF to support employment and inclusion policies in the EU can also be used to apply the lessons from EQUAL well beyond the experimental framework of this Community Initiative. Transnational cooperation can speed up this process by providing structured opportunities for mutual learning involving those who are responsible for the implementation of operational programmes and other strategic stakeholders. Building and capitalising on validated good practice from EQUAL will help to close or reduce the existing gaps in the delivery and implementation of effective strategies to increase the participation of disadvantaged groups in employment.

EQUAL's experience of providing integration pathways for disadvantaged groups has highlighted some priorities that should be taken into account by those who are involved in the construction and operation of European Social Fund programmes:

- Give specific priority to projects developing integration pathways that include neighbourhood-based initiatives **and** partnership approaches;
- Involve representatives of excluded people in the planning and implementation of local development strategies;

- Establish new models of access to a full range of services and for developing grass-roots capacities;
- Provide assessment, counselling, training in basic skills and new skills;
- Support job creation including the development of self-employment and public-private partnerships;
- Promote awareness-raising and the development of self-help networks;
- Customise assistance to business creation by vulnerable groups;
- Demonstrate the benefits of integration pathways to those responsible for immigration policies, prisons, drug prevention programmes or social services.

5. PATHWAY LESSONS FOR SPECIFIC TARGET GROUPS

As has been indicated, the principles and the main components of pathway approaches are broadly similar in the case of all groups. However, the nature of the attitudinal barriers that each group faces are different, as are some of the key actors involved, particularly those who have first line responsibilities for people in these groups and those NGOs and other representatives in civil society who have an concern for, or represent the interests of, these groups. In addition, there are few similarities in the legal and institutional frameworks within which the pathways for the various groups are developed.

If you are interested in the concept of pathways and would like to find out more about EQUAL's practical experience in establishing pathways for its three main target groups and the lessons that have been learned, please click on the appropriate link below.

Links to Pathway Lessons for Specific Target Groups

- [Pathways for People with Disabilities](#)
- [Pathways for \(Ex\)-Offenders](#)
- [Pathways for Immigrants and Ethnic Minorities](#)