



Peer Review on Competence Check for the Labour Market Integration of Female Refugees

DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

Synthesis Report

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Competence check for the Labour Market Integration of Female Refugees

Synthesis Report

Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

Peer Review on 'Competence Check for the Labour Market Integration of Female
Refugees', Vienna, 26-27 June 2017

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background and purpose of the Peer Review

With nearly 2.5 million new asylum applications in 2015 and 2016, many Member States in the European Union (EU) have increased efforts to integrate refugees and asylum seekers¹ into their societies. Labour market integration is an important factor for the overall integration process, as refugees and asylum seekers can contribute to the economy with their skills and knowledge, practice their language skills, build up social contacts and become financially independent.

A mayor challenge for both male and female refugees to enter the labour market is the recognition process of their skills and qualifications: some refugees and asylum seekers do not possess any documentation of their qualifications and/or the recognition process of qualifications in the host country is very complex. In addition, some refugees and asylum seekers have professional experience which is not recognised by a qualification (a formal qualification may, for instance, not be needed in their home country). Thus, there is a need for solutions allowing recently arrived refugees and asylum seekers to have their skills and qualifications identified, documented, assessed and certified. These solutions need to take language barriers, cultural differences and individual difficulties, such as traumatic experiences, into account.

Although the majority of newly arrived asylum seekers in the EU-28 were men (74% in 2015, and around 68% in 2016), the number of female asylum seekers doubled from 2014 to 2015 (from 186 000 to 367 000) and, again, increased in 2016 to reach over 400 000 asylum applicants². In 2016, over 238 000 female asylum applicants were granted some form of protection in the EU-28³.

Compared to their male counterparts, female refugees often face additional barriers during their integration into the labour market. Traditional role models might hinder the access for female refugees to support measures. In order to support the labour market integration process of female refugees the Austrian Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection (BMASK) together with the Austrian Public Employment Service (AMS) developed "Competence Checks" that are targeted at refugees, including female refugees. The "Competence Checks" for female refugees that are run by abz*Austria (a non-profit organisation responsible for piloting the "Competence Check" for female refugees) last seven weeks. They consist of workshops run in Farsi/Dari, Arabic, and German, group and individual counselling and practical skills testing in order to identify the skills, qualifications, plans and ambitions of the participants in order to facilitate their integration on the labour market. According to abz*Austria, these seven weeks' duration is crucial when dealing with the integration of female refugees: experience has shown that refugee women need more time in order to open up, feel comfortable, and become ready for the labour market integration process.

This measure was presented and discussed during the Peer Review on 26-27 June 2017, hosted by the BMASK and bringing together government representatives and

¹ Refugees and asylum seekers have a different legal status across Member States. Therefore, this document differentiates between: *Asylum seekers* who have applied for international protection. According to the Reception Conditions Directive, Member States shall ensure that applicants have access to the labour market no later than 9 months from the date of their application for international protection. Until then, the timing of access to the labour market for asylum seekers and the type of access (restricted/unrestricted in terms of occupations, working hours etc.) to the labour market depends on the Member States' regulations. *Refugees* (beneficiaries of international protection) who have been granted refugee status or subsidiary protection status. According to the Qualification Directive, refugees have unrestricted access to the labour market.

² Eurostat (migr_asyappctzm), extracted: 12 June 2017.

³ Eurostat (migr_asydcfina), extracted: 12 June 2017.

independent experts from eight EU Member States, namely Austria, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovenia, and Sweden. Representatives from Austria, AMS, and the European Commission also participated in the Peer Review. In addition, a study visit was organised at the Coaching and Counselling Agency for Migrants in Vienna.

The measures to promote labour market integration of refugee women are determined by the general support structures provided to refugees and asylum seekers in the host and in peer countries. Therefore, the event also discussed important aspects of labour market integration of refugees and asylum seekers in general, with a particular aspect on qualification recognition and skills validation.

1.2 European policy context

EU legislation regulates the legal right to access the labour market for refugees in Art.26 (1) of the recast "Qualification Directive"⁴. Beneficiaries of international protection can engage in employed or self-employed activities "immediately after protection has been granted". At the national level, all Member States have introduced the right of refugees to access employment into domestic legislation.⁵ Moreover, Art.33 of the recast "Qualification Directive" calls on Member States to facilitate access to integration programmes. The integration process of refugees and asylum seekers is a national responsibility, so integration measures differ between Member States.

In terms of the recognition of qualifications, the "Professional Qualifications Directive"⁶ applies to EU citizens and to third country nationals (incl. refugees), but only if the holder of the certificate has three years' professional experience in the profession on the territory of the Member State. Member States review on a case-by-case basis and have flexibility in approving the qualification and allowing someone to practice a certain profession. For a limited number of professions (doctors, dentists, nurses, midwives, pharmacists, veterinary surgeons and architects) the Directive allows for an automatic recognition process of qualifications within the EU. The Directive was reviewed in 2013 (2013/55/EU) in order to support the mobility of professionals by the use of modern technologies in their recognition procedures, to cut through red tape and to speed up procedures.

Skills validation acknowledges non-formal and informal learning⁷ in order to utilise these competences on the labour market or in education. This ultimately contributes to achieving the goals set by the Europe 2020 strategy as a tool for better matching skills and labour demand and supporting labour mobility across sectors and countries. The "Recommendation on the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning"⁸ from 2012 foresees that skills and competences acquired via non-formal and informal learning should be validated by national arrangements, to be set up by Member States by 2018. In this context, the "New Skills Agenda for Europe"⁹, launched by the European

⁴ Directive 2011/95/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011

⁵ EMN (2016), "Integration of beneficiaries of international/humanitarian protection into the labour market: policies and good practices". available at : http://emn.ie/files/p_201607141244022016_integration_of_beneficiaries_of_international_protection_emn_synthesis.pdf, last accessed: 19 June 2017.

⁶ Directive 2005/36/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 September 2005

⁷ *In-formal skills* result from daily activities related to work, family or leisure; they are not organised or structured. They are opposite to formal learning experience. *Non-formal learning* is embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning. Non-formal skills and competencies are a by-product of other learning activities which are intentional from the learner's point of view. *Example*: a car mechanics course in the workplace (formal learning), in which the students also learn something about teamwork or problem solving.

⁸ <http://eurlex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:398:0001:0005:EN:PDF>

⁹ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223>

Commission in 2016, aims to make better use of existing skills and to equip people with the skills that are needed for quality jobs and improving their life chances. Under the New Skills Agenda, the proposed "Upskilling pathways for low skilled adults" promotes opportunities for validation of non-formal and informal learning.

In order to further support early identification and profiling of skills and qualifications of asylum seekers, refugees and other migrants, the European Commission developed a "Skills Profile Tool Kit for Third Country Nationals"¹⁰, launched on the 19th of June 2017. The online tool aims to identify qualifications, non-formal and informal learning of third country nationals as well as their future goals: from improving their language skills to finding a job in a field of their choice. The tool is designed to propose next steps for action on the basis of the provided information. It can be used by, particularly, national authorities responsible for reception and integration of refugees, PES, education and training advisers, social services, NGOs and charitable organisations. It is designed in a way that it is easily understood by actors across the EU. Collected data will also be used for statistical purposes.

2 The Austrian approach to labour market inclusion and integration of (female) refugees

Austria experienced an influx of large numbers of refugees in 2015 and 2016. Citizens from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Syria, who currently account for the vast majority of refugees in Austria, represented 94 452, or 15% of all third country citizens.¹¹ In 2016, about two thirds (63%) of all 25 026 unemployed refugees in Austria were registered with the Public Employment Service (PES) in Vienna¹². Since a lack of validation of prior learning and work experiences has a negative impact for refugees on finding employment in Austria, urgent action was needed to avoid de-qualification and demotivation of refugees.

Identifying and documenting skills and qualifications of refugees is rendered difficult due to the unexperienced qualification backgrounds of the refugees and also because of missing documents of the refugees. As a result, the "Competence Check" was developed as a pilot project in 2015 run by abz*Austria. In 2016, the competences of 5 982 people were assessed in "Competence Checks", including 712 Competence Checks for female unemployed refugees older than 18 years.¹³

The "Competence Check" aims at identifying and documenting the competences of a refugee in order to inform the PES about the individual's employability and/or needs for further training and support measures. In addition to its core function, the "Competence Check" also aims at providing information for the individual refugee about job opportunities in the Austrian labour market along his or her competences and to develop individual development plans. The particular aims of the "Competence Check" for the Professional Integration of Women 18+, provided by abz*Austria, is to contribute to the empowerment of female refugees and to overcome gender specific barriers in accessing the Austrian labour market.

The "Competence Check" for female refugees lasts for seven weeks. It is implemented in groups of approximately 12 participants. Each week comprises ten hours of group sessions (workshops) and one hour for individual coaching. To accommodate for different time preferences, abz*Austria offers three different time slots per week for parallel groups. Each week is composed of three modules held in a workshop setting, plus the individual coaching session. The courses are run in Farsi/Dari, Arabic, and German. The content covers fundamental principles of the welfare system, public health,

¹⁰ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223&intPageId=5019&langId=en>

¹¹ <http://www.integrationsfonds.at/fileadmin/content/migrationintegration-2016.pdf>

¹² Host Country Report Austria.

¹³ Host Country Report Austria.

housing, common practices, such as dealing with diversity and communal life, the Austrian qualification and employment system (such as the vocational qualifications, formal education and training, and labour market regulations), labour market orientation, identifying and documenting skills, competences and qualifications of participants and preparation for job search (e.g. application documents, preparation for the recruitment processes). In addition, abzw*Austria organises meetings with employers, trail internships and supports the participants with the preparation of documents for external use.

According to the host country peer review paper, the identified success factors of the "Competence Check" for the Professional Integration of Women 18+ includes: 1) taking identification and documentation of competences seriously; 2) a more intense focus on individual competencies and their use; 3) combining individual and institutional needs and perspectives; 4) mediation and referral; 5) combination of workshop setting, individual coaching and native language provision; and 6) the gender/diversity perspective.

3 Approaches to labour market inclusion and integration of (female) refugees

This section focuses the key issues related to designing effective policy interventions for the labour market integration of female refugees as was identified during the Peer Review. It is structured as follows:

- Section 3.1 considers the timing of support measures that facilitate labour market integration of asylum seekers and refugees, highlighting the positive impact of an early intervention on asylum seekers' and refugees' labour market integration process;
- Section 3.2 presents national approaches from the host and peer countries of qualification recognition and skills validation of refugees and asylum seekers;
- Section 3.3 looks at targeted measures to labour market integration of female refugees and stresses successful approaches, such as peer support;
- Section 3.4 discusses combined measures of organising and delivering labour market integration programmes, with a focus on cooperative approaches between actors.

3.1 Early intervention to facilitate labour market integration

While refugees have access to support measures for labour market integration in host and peer countries, the access to support services and to the labour market for asylum seekers differs across countries.

Recent literature points out that early intervention, i.e. a timely provision of support measures, has a positive impact on labour market integration¹⁴. However, the recent increase in numbers of asylum applications slowed down the recognition procedures, as observed in the Netherlands, where the high number of asylum seekers has resulted in decision making processes lasting up to six months and, in some cases, up to 15 months (compared to eight days prior to 2016). This might cause demotivation in asylum applicants and an increasing pressure on public budgets. On the other hand, there is also a risk in providing resources to support asylum seekers before residence permits

¹⁴ Aiyar, S. et al. (2016), "The Refugee Surge in Europe: Economic Challenges"; European Parliament (2016), "Labour Market Integration of Refugees: Strategies and good practices"; OECD (2016), "Making Integration Work: Refugees and others in need of protection", available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/56af089d4.html>, last accessed on 14 June 2017.

are granted, rather than focussing on those who have already been granted a leave to remain. Therefore, preferential rules in order to manage high numbers of asylum applications and long processing times might increase the effectiveness of the process. Organisations like the OECD recommend the provision of integration services and facilitated labour market access to asylum applicants with high prospects of being allowed to stay in the host country¹⁵.

This has been an approach taken forward by Germany, a country very much affected by the refugee inflow. After a legislative change in 2015, asylum seekers with a high likelihood of staying in Germany (from Syria, Iran, Iraq, Eritrea) have access to integration measures offered by the PES. The aim is to support them with language courses and training in order to facilitate a quick integration into the labour market. The other two groups are people from so called “safe” countries of origin (mainly the Western Balkans) who are not allowed to work, and asylum seekers with a medium prospect to remain in Germany who belong to a group that is considered as “complex cases”. Their application is individually assessed so that they may gain at least a subordinated access to the labour market after three months. A similar approach is now envisaged in the host country, Austria, where the Ministry of Interior and the individual regions have been responsible for asylum seekers. A planned legislative change, the obligatory “Integration Year”, will provide access to PES for asylum seekers from countries with a high likelihood of staying in Austria.

Moreover, some countries have also taken efforts to promote orientation and language support in the initial stages of the asylum procedure, in order to prevent inactivity and deterioration of integration prospects. In Finland, the National Board of Education in cooperation with the Ministry of Employment and the Economy organises language training and other integrative training for asylum seekers living in reception centres. This training consists of three different pathways, depending on individual circumstances, and also aims to inform the PES offices about education and work experience of asylum seekers¹⁶.

3.2 Recognition of qualifications and skills validation

The recognition of qualifications

The recognition of existing qualifications is an important pre-condition for enabling a person to work in their profession. The peer countries present at the event differed in terms of recognition procedures, the time it takes to recognise qualifications and the actors responsible for qualification recognition. Moreover, arrangements for qualification recognition also depend on whether they are for regulated professions: therefore requiring a specific degree, exam or a registration with a professional body to practice the profession and depending on the professional standards that exist in the individual country. The recognition process might in these cases take some time, especially if documents are missing. Often, complementary training is necessary, for example if there is a different education level in the country of origin and the host country.

Across peer countries there are different actors responsible for the recognition process. In some countries, such as France, there are single national institutions responsible for the recognition process. The French Centre of Enic-Naric is responsible for all migrants, but prioritises refugees. In other countries, such as Germany, the recognition process is more complex, as a range of actors are involved. For example, in Germany, medical

¹⁵ OECD (2016): “Making Integration Work. Refugees and Others in Need of Protection.” OECD Publishing Paris: available at: <https://www.oecd.org/migration/making-integration-work-humanitarian-migrants-9789264251236-en.htm>, last accessed on 19 June 2017.

¹⁶ EEPO (2016), “Synthesis on challenges faced by asylum seekers and refugees in successfully”, available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=15894&langId=en>, last accessed: 13 June 2017.

qualifications need to be acknowledged at the federal level, and teaching qualifications recognised at the regional level. These recognition procedures tend not to be known by refugees. In order to address this problem, guidance and counselling measures have been set up:

Examples of guidance and counselling for qualification recognition

The **Viennese Coaching and Counselling Agency for Migrants** runs the project 'Perspective', which aims to support refugees to get their qualifications recognised. They offer an assessment of qualifications in order to find out if a formal recognition is needed. They furthermore support refugees during their formal recognition process and provide advice on further training or education. Another project, "Check-in plus", that is run together with the PES, is aimed at highly-qualified migrants (university graduates, persons with higher vocational education). The agency supports them during the recognition process via detailed career plans that include concrete steps towards working in the respective profession. Since an important target group are doctors, the agency offers, for instance, special language courses for doctors, the preparation for the necessary exams and other administrative assistance.

The **German IQ Network** provides information on vocational professions and the recognition of qualifications in regulated and non-regulated professions. It also offers inter-cultural training measures for relevant actors, including PES staff. There are also around 140 projects that include upskilling measures where counselling or the recognition procedure indicate that qualifications are not sufficient. Such upskilling measures can include both professional training and language tuition. Most of these measures are currently targeted at health care professionals.

Some initiatives from the countries present at the event focus on highly-qualified refugees with the aim of facilitating rapid recognition of qualifications. In regulated professions, cooperation with universities and other institutions of higher education might provide useful knowledge in dealing with highly-qualified refugees and asylum seekers. For example, in the SIMHE project (**Supporting Immigrants in Higher Education in Finland**), implemented in Helsinki, higher education institutes are already providing specific guidance and recognition services to foreign students. This cooperation has already helped 20 000 foreign students. Expertise gained about cultural differences in the education context can now be used to support refugees and asylum seekers.

Skills validation

Some refugees and asylum seekers may not possess qualifications, but do have work experience. It might be the case that their profession requires a formal qualification that is not required in their home country. Moreover, some newly-arrived refugees might also have worked in professions that are not undertaken in the peer countries, so the aim is to 'transfer skills' and find similar professions in which their skills could be utilised. Therefore, there is a need for solutions allowing recently-arrived refugees and asylum seekers to have their skills identified, documented, assessed and certified. However, all countries offering formal validation of formal and non-formal learning for refugees and asylum seekers need to consider language and cultural barriers that prohibit the adequate self-assessment of skills and qualifications. Cultural barriers can include being unfamiliar with self-assessment itself as a method, because it is not common in their culture.

This also correlates with the general development of skills validation procedures, as systematic national procedures to validate informal and non-formal learning are yet to be established in some countries. For example, although the validation of informal and non-formal learning is available for job seekers in Romania, the use of validation services is limited because of an insufficient development of the system and the lack of information among potential target groups. In Sweden, a governmental commission is currently reviewing the existing validation system in order to design a new policy. Some

countries, such as Finland and France, already have advanced procedures in place for identifying informal and non-formal learning. In the Finnish validation system, for instance, social partners, including employers, are involved in all aspects of the validation, from designing the content of requirements to individual validation procedures. This promotes transparency and buy-in from employers, i.e. employers recognise qualifications gained through validation as equally valuable and trustworthy as qualifications gained through school-based learning¹⁷.

Countries with a high number of regulated professions, such as Germany and Austria, are aiming to develop testing systems that address non-formal and informal learning of refugees. In these countries, vocational education and training is connected to a dual educational system and to a qualification pathway which is steered by the social partners. These types of system place considerable emphasis on formal training and professional certificates. For people without formal vocational certificates, especially refugees, it is therefore much more complicated to make their acquired professional experience and competences visible. In Germany, the issue has been addressed by several projects, resulting in a rather complex bundle of skills identification methods and skills development procedures, which are provided by different training providers, by employers, as well as by the PES. The responsibilities for these disparate measures and competences are divided between the national and regional level. As such, there is no uniform process for skills validation.

In France, although some skills are validated by a diploma or a certificate (comparability assessment is provided by Enic-Naric), "soft skills", often related to flight and integration experience (e.g. stress resistance, adaptability, resilience), as well as to previous non-professional experience (e.g. mediation, leadership, etc.), are not considered. However, projects that aim to address this gap include, for example, Accelair. This project was launched by a non-profit organisation in 2002 in the Rhône department and focuses on a comprehensive integration approach that addresses both housing and employment issues. A qualitative review of formal and non-formal competencies based on needs is also included in the project.

Validation of informal and non-formal skills and competences for labour market purposes

Country	Validation of (informal/ non-formal) skills and competences	Validation targeted at migrants/refugees
Austria	No uniform framework	Competence checks
Finland	Well established system that is regulated by several laws and has a strong co-operation between stakeholders	Pilot projects
France	Well-established system in place for 15 years, connected to the national qualification framework	National integration policy allows for the assessment of skills recognised by a diploma or a certificate (comparability assessment provided by Enic-Naric)

¹⁷ CEDEFOP, Country Report Finland, 2017. available at: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory#country>, last accessed: 13 July 2017.

Germany	No common legal framework; many initiatives on a pilot or regional level	Initiatives implemented by different bodies, professional competencies pilot: My Skills (see below)
Romania	Insufficient development of the system for validation of skills acquired through informal and non-formal learning	No specific measure in place, but the "Strategic Framework for increasing participation in lifelong learning in Romania" sets a specific priority measure for the validation of skills acquired by individuals with work experience from abroad.
Slovenia	National validation system still in an initial phase, recognition of prior learning educational institutions. Awareness-raising activities by PES	No specific measure in place, but validation methods are being prepared, especially for refugees and displaced people who do not possess any formal documents.
Sweden	Validation system currently in review	"Fast-track" methods and procedures (see below)

Source: PES Network (2017), Thematic Paper on 'PES initiatives around Skills, Competencies and Qualifications of Refugees and Asylum Seekers' (forthcoming); CEDEFOP (2017) European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning, country reports 2016. Available here: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory#country>

In order to address the specific needs of refugees, efforts have been made to develop tools for the validation of skills for those with no formal qualifications, but with work experience or informal training. A number of Member States (as seen in the box below) have put measures in place that aim to identify the skills of refugees and asylum seekers. This may be through structured interviews in their native language, multilingual questionnaires, simulations or various technology-based tests.

Examples of skills validation methods for refugees

In the Austrian "**Competence Check**" that is offered at female refugees and provided by abz*Austria, trainers use different tools to identify the skills of participants: the Competence Matrix used by the PES; measures developed by abz*Austria itself; and the Language and Integration Portfolio developed by the Austrian Integration Fund. The trainer knows the participants well and decides which tools to use in each case. The decision depends on language skills, working experience and the qualifications and literacy of the participants.

Tilburg University and the municipality of Tilburg in the Netherlands developed so-called "**Competence Cards**" that help refugees and asylum seekers, via self-assessment, to identify their work experience, education and preferences. A "Competence Card" is a digital tool structured on the basis of the American O*NET database of occupations and skills¹⁸. It allows for targeted matching of skills recognised by employers and educational institutes, online as well as offline. For example, a "speed dating" session between employers and refugees was organised at Tilburg University, where 69% of participating refugees received an invitation for a job interview based on their "Competence Card" profile.

¹⁸ ETS, 'Identifying the most important 21st century workforce competencies: an analysis of the occupational information network', November 2013. available at: <https://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/RR-13-21.pdf>, last accessed 13 July 2017.

Together with partners, the German PES is developing “**My Skills**”, an interactive image and video guided test procedure, to identify non-formal acquired professional skills for people without a formal qualification. Assessments are developed for around 30 occupations (e.g. mechatronics, salesperson or plumber) by identifying differentiated competencies within profession profiles, often based on images and videos. The test is available in six languages: German, English, Arabic, modern Persian, Turkish and Russian. Testing takes around four hours and is carried out by the psychological department in the PES.

3.3 Targeted approaches for female refugees

In general, only a few projects and programmes are in place for the specific target group of female refugees. There were differences observed in the approaches taken in the peer countries. For example, in Sweden, Finland and France, a non-gender-specific approach is taken, while targeted approaches are applied on a project basis in Germany and Austria.

Moreover, female refugees are a heterogeneous group (there are differences by age, educational level, work experience background, etc.). To support this diverse target group, individualised approaches were favoured by the peer countries present at the event. Nevertheless, the implementation of individualised approaches is resource intense and also strongly depends on the availability of facilitators capable of speaking the languages of the refugees.

Successful measures for female refugees implemented in the peer countries comprise:

- Peer support (e.g. mentoring; migrant networks; peer group engagement) among female refugees is important to identify skills, stimulate empowerment and to select channels for further support and guidance, such as career counselling. In Germany, for instance, experience emphasises the importance of peer groups and their empowerment possibility. Good practice also includes refugee networks and mentorship systems, as practiced in Slovenia, where refugees serve as mentors. In addition, buddy systems can assist where migrants who have more expertise and knowledge about the country serve as mentors for newly-arrived refugees.
- Career advice that considers the work-life balance and that offers sustainable job options are of particular importance to female refugees. Specialised career advice was mentioned as measure by representatives from Austria and Germany. Career guidance may guide refugees to work in sectors with labour demand, for example in the technology sector. In the case of refugee women, this might offer career opportunities and sustainable labour market integration, instead of precarious employment opportunities in which migrant women are often proportionally over presented.
- Measures that reach out to those women who would otherwise not attend support measures are practiced in Finland. These measures have a potential for transferability and implementation in other Member States since this group is often not targeted by mainstream measures.
- Active involvement of employers is important. The peer countries observed the need for capacity building seminars and awareness raising events for and with employers, such as conferences. In the Netherlands, the active involvement of employers is reported to be the most challenging success factor. In order to reduce uncertainty and hesitation among organisations, several refugee and employer matchmaking days have been organised in which potential employer concerns and uncertainties are addressed and refugees have been able to present themselves professionally. Thus, measures that offer support to companies and actions where they are engaged from start are strongly recommended.

Practice example: Perspectives for female refugees (PerF-W), Germany

Female refugees often enter Germany together with their children, and sometimes without male company. At the same time, they are key to a successful integration of their children and the whole family. Above all, female refugees need access to information and support for self-empowerment and for coping with everyday life (e.g. information on the regulations and system of childcare outside the family home). In addition, they often do not know about the opportunity for equal participation in the German working life. The special programme "Perspectives for female refugees" (PerF-W) includes all of these aspects: the role and rights of women in Germany; access to the training and employment market; practical professional experience; job-related German language training; the strengthening of competences; as well as childcare provision in or close to the institution offering the course. A part-time course lasts for four months.

3.4 Combined measures

In order to provide services that address individual needs, a move away from 'linear approaches' is needed. Programmes should be designed that aim to support different aspects at the same time, such as language skills, training and integration. These measures are useful to facilitate a quicker labour market integration, whilst – in parallel – public resources might be used more efficiently. For example, highly-qualified people may not need certain support measures, such as language training or upskilling, but rather support with qualification recognition. On the other hand, a more vulnerable person might require access to certain support measures, such as mental health support services. For a number of refugees and asylum seekers, a combination of different support measures might better address individual needs. Combined measures of work experience, training and language support might facilitate more rapid integration into the labour market. Once skills and/or qualifications have been identified, work experience in the related field can allow the refugee to acquire vocationally-specific language, build contacts and strengthen his/her understanding of the local labour market. These approaches can be combined with the further assessment of skills and qualifications, complementary education and training (bridging courses) leading to a certain qualification, work placements and continuous language training (often addressing vocational language needs). A phased 'work-first' approach that combines work experience (via internships, work placement etc.) with (part-time) training and language or integration courses might be more cost-effective and provides rapid access to the actual work environment in the host country.

Examples of combined approaches of language training and work experience

An example of a combined approach is the **Swedish fast-tracks** that aim to speed up employment for refugees with qualifications and skills in sectors with labour demand. The fast-tracks cover most professions and industries and are planned jointly between the social partners, the PES and other relevant authorities and education agencies. As of March 2017, there were 14 agreements elaborated between the partners, comprising fast-tracks in 31 professions. Each fast-track has a different design, but follows 5 steps (including skills mapping and assessment and work experience):

1. Skills mapping on the basis of a self-assessment in the refugees' native language. If a person may potentially hold a professional qualification in a relevant fast-track profession, the person will be referred on to the next step in the process.
2. For a post-secondary education fast-track, qualification recognition is organised.
3. The validation of skills is based on sector-specific requirements, consisting of both practical and theoretical tests to identify available skills.
4. The professional assessment aims to review and document the person's ability to practice a profession, including recommendations for the completion of the skills

validation process. The professional competence assessment is planned in the framework of a work placement and can last for three weeks.

5. The last step, work experience, helps gain occupational orientation and professional practice. It can also be implemented with the purpose of letting the person strengthen his/her skills and/or develop his/her Swedish language skills.

Parallel to these steps, each participant studies the Swedish language. In March 2017, 3 540 individuals (of which 1 072 were women) had commenced participation in the initiative, since 1 January 2016. A recent report¹⁹ published by the Swedish PES showed that between 33% (i.e. food industry) and 52% (truck drivers) of individuals that participated in the fast-track initiative were in employment 13-15 months after they started (there is no pre-agreed duration of participation in the fast track initiative). The likeliness of employment increases for those who participated for 13-15 months, compared to those who participated for only 7-9 months. For fast-trackers that need to obtain qualifications, the time taken to obtain work is often longer because of qualification recognition efforts required – 29% obtain work within 13-15 months of commencing the fast-track.

A similar approach has been taken forward in the **French project “Refugeeks”**²⁰ in which a small number of refugees participated in language classes and web coding classes at the same time. At the end of the programme, 50% of the trainees were able to secure a job at companies Accenture and Total.

In Germany, the short-term programme **“Perspective for Refugees”** combines skills validation at a workplace for six weeks, vocational language courses and counselling for a first orientation in the German labour market. The measure results in a written report about each participant’s professional skills and his or her special abilities, as well as recommendations for further needs for action.

The results from skills identification procedures need to be well considered to plan further support measures. This is particularly the case for the development of combined measures, as they provide guidance on necessary skills training and work experience opportunities. Skills identification often takes place, as in the Swedish case, at the beginning of the measure. Therefore, coordination between service providers and knowledge transfer about the results achieved is important. The results of the Austrian “Competence Check” or the German “My Skills”, for instance, are used to inform PES staff to decide on further service provision. In the Netherlands, the cooperation between employment and housing is ensured via the measure “Screening and Matching” that was implemented by the Central Organ Sheltering Asylum Seekers (COA) and aims to connect housing decisions with the skills and qualifications of refugees and matching education or work opportunities. This was developed because of observed mismatches between refugees’ needs and locally-available opportunities and resources (in terms of social networks and appropriate job availability). The measure allows for a parallel provision of support services, avoiding the previous sequential manner of service provision that resulted in considerable delays between each step of the process. Municipalities, COA and other relevant stakeholders (educational institutes, refugee foundations and employment organizations) closely cooperate to ensure a swift and an adequate integration process. Anecdotal evidence hints at significant gains in terms of efficiency and achieved integration results.²¹ The measure is being further improved and developed, most notably with regards to the skills identification of refugees. The

¹⁹ Arbetsförmedlingen (2017), “Arbetsförmedlingens nulägesbedömning av arbetet med snabbspår”.

²⁰ <http://simplon.co/refugeeks-fr/>

²¹ Divosa ‘Er komt iemand binnen en die kan iets’, April 2017. available at: https://www.divosa.nl/sites/default/files/sprank_bestanden/sprank-042017-er-komt-iemand-binnen-en-die-kan-iets.pdf, Last accessed 4 June 2017.

government expects that social support and assistance is provided more efficiently and labour market participation of refugees increases through this approach.²²

In order to facilitate skills validation, qualification recognition and, ultimately, entry into the labour market, other measures such as job-related training or other active labour market policy programme measures need to be considered. For example, results from the “Competence Check” in Austria need to be incorporated into the standardised “Integration Pathway” - the Austrian Government agreed in early 2017 on a new legislative proposal that foresees the introduction of an obligatory “Integration Year” for refugees and certain asylum seekers. Participation will be obligatory for a minimum of 12 months or until participants enter employment.

3.4.1. Cooperative approaches

In order to make efficient use of the positive outcomes of integration measures and to avoid demotivation, the different measures, such as skills identification, language training, and counselling should be designed so that they are coherent and linked up. Therefore, coordination between service providers and knowledge transfer on the results achieved is a necessity.

A challenge raised during group discussions at the event was the common experience of gaps and/or overlaps in service provision: either some needs remain unaddressed or services are provided twice, or unnecessarily. Cooperative approaches between stakeholders at the various geographical levels, and horizontally, are therefore important during all stages of the integration process.

At the start of the integration process, participants highlighted the challenge of information exchange between the respective institutions responsible for reception and the recognition process and further services providing employment, health or housing support. This issue has been addressed recently at national level, for example in France, via the agreement by the State administration and the PES that aims to coordinate orientation and counselling services and adequate language classes in order to facilitate effective access to the labour market. Though the agreement does not specifically target female refugees, they will be able to benefit from the new arrangements. In Romania, the National Strategy for Immigration 2015-2018 declares that education and training of migrants are essential for integration into the host society and the labour market. The Romanian approach is to provide newcomers with Romanian language courses and sessions of cultural guidance and counselling. In Slovenia, activities for the integration of people under international protection are coordinated by the Ministry of Interior. Relevant Ministries implement and fund specific projects under their competencies, including project funding of work of NGOs, volunteers in asylum homes and public educational institutions that provide languages courses for refugees.

The recognition process for qualifications, the validation of skills and the provision of services that address individual needs (housing, child care, health care) especially require cooperative approaches at the local and the regional level; because most services are provided by regions, municipalities or local branches of PES services. In this regard, local migration agencies and PES services should aim to work together to allow for an individualised provision of services. To provide more guidance to newly-arrived refugees, single points of contact can be set up, as has been done in the region of North Rhine–Westphalia in Germany.

In terms of local service provision, the link between housing policies and employment support was also raised in some peer countries. For example, refugees in France no longer benefit from dedicated housing assistance once they are recognised, but are offered general housing support that is available for every citizen. However, many still

²² Divosa, ‘Project screening vergunninghouders vandaag van start’, 24 November 2016. available at: <https://www.divosa.nl/nieuws/project-screening-vergunninghouders-vandaag-van-start> , Last accessed 4 June 2017.

live in precarious conditions several years after they have arrived (temporary housing, at friends, shelters, etc.). Among other factors, this is because housing is strongly connected to employment. The local project Accelair, as mentioned above, aims to address this issue and has developed a cooperative approach that assists all refugees regardless of their housing situation. It involves as many local key players as possible and increases knowledge about legal regulations and common law (for example, by translating brochures), provides of interpretation services and local awareness campaigns to inform social and employment services and the general public. In Finland, a quick identification of professional skills of asylum seekers in reception centres while awaiting asylum decisions is taken into consideration when choosing a settlement area that offers education and business opportunities to match the identified skills²³.

In addition to cooperation between public authorities, NGOs and community organisations can offer comprehensive aid programmes for refugees and asylum seekers and signpost them to available services. Apart from the institutional contacts mentioned above, NGOs develop and maintain direct contacts with refugees. This enables them to provide specific help and care on an individual basis, assisting refugees in further communication with the majority population and public institutions. Their efforts are at the heart of current activities for integration and employment of refugees.

Furthermore, cooperation with employers is required to develop skills validation methods, to facilitate job placement and upskilling. In Sweden, for instance, the fast-track initiative (see above) has been introduced to help refugees with work experience or an education connected to a sector that is currently facing a labour shortage, to enter the labour market. As part of the initiative, participants can have their professional credentials validated, and access is provided to profession-specific Swedish language training. Here, employers in the respective sectors offer opportunities for skills identification at the workplace and provide work experience opportunities. Employers, however, also need information about available measures and support to integrate refugees in the work place (e.g. practices like 'speed-dating' for enhancing placement or tax benefits are applied in the peer countries).

3.4.2. Local experimentation

Like the "Competence Checks", most measures start at the local project level and are then more widely rolled-out. Measures that are designed in that way can respond initially to local (labour market) needs and to locally available services.

A bottom-up approach and engagement of civil society can help stimulate the development of innovative approaches, which may subsequently be mainstreamed on a wider scale, as happened with the Austrian example. National guidelines, however, should be designed and applied across all levels to enable a common approach in order to comply with recognised occupational standards, to facilitate information exchange between regions and to gain transparency and buy-in from employers.

A good way to develop national guidelines is through the involvement of all relevant stakeholders at national, regional and local level. However, a certain degree of flexibility is needed to respond to local labour market needs and local resources. For example, whilst the "Competence Checks" are mainly implemented in Vienna, where most refugees live, other Austrian regions might take elements of the measure and apply it to their local context.

In order to facilitate a successful roll-out, evidence about the outcomes of measures is needed. This will furthermore help to justify funding, but also to generate buy-in from employers and the society. However, evidence about outcomes of newly-developed

²³ <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/news/finland-action-plan-on-integration-taking-into-account-increasing-immigration-flows>

measures is still limited. As such, there is also a need to review previous evidence of effective labour market measures offered to migrants and adapt them to the specific needs of refugees.

4 Conclusions and recommendations

The Peer Review on 'Competence Check for the Labour Market Integration of Female Refugees' (Vienna 26-27 June 2017) highlighted the need for early intervention to facilitate labour market integration of refugees and asylum seekers. One of the first steps is to gather information on what competences and qualifications the refugees and asylum seekers possess. A major challenge for both male and female refugees to entering the labour market is the recognition process of their qualifications and validation of their skills. Solutions allowing recently-arrived refugees and asylum seekers to have their skills and qualifications identified, documented, assessed and certified are therefore in demand. These solutions, however, need to take language barriers, cultural differences and individual difficulties, such as often traumatic experiences, into account.

Compared to their male counterparts, female refugees and asylum seekers often face additional barriers to integrating into the labour market. These typically relate to gender-based challenges during flight and the existence of more traditional role models that can be a barrier to accessing support measures. The Austrian example of the "Competence Checks" for female refugees, which are seven-week courses consisting of workshops (run in Farsi/Dari, Arabic, and German), counselling and practical skills testing, showed how the skills and qualifications of the women participants can be identified and used for the labour market.

The peer review further highlighted that targeted approaches for female refugees and asylum seekers are relatively scarce. While in some countries, such as Sweden, a non-gender-specific approach is favoured, targeted approaches for female refugees and asylum seekers have their advantages: they are key to successful integration of female refugees, of their children and the whole family. Nevertheless, female refugees and asylum seekers are not a homogenous group: they differ by age, educational level, working experience, culture and others dimensions.

In order to support the diverse target group of female refugees and asylum seekers, individualised approaches are favoured. Above all, female refugees and asylum seekers need access to information and support for empowering their own resources and for coping with everyday life (e.g. information on the regulations and system of childcare outside the family home). Successful measures highlighted in the peer review and recommended to other Member States include peer support (mentoring, groups), career guidance and measures that actively target those women who otherwise would not attend support measures.

As different actors are responsible for the integration process across peer countries, the need for cooperative approaches that lead to an improved combination of measures was stressed. Organising and delivering labour market integration programmes, particularly via cooperative approaches between actors, and, especially across the geographical levels, from the local to the regional and the national level, are required. Federal countries, such as Germany and Austria, face particular challenges since responsibilities are often shared between federal and regional level. Vertical and horizontal coordination of measures therefore needs to be ensured, and 'national guidelines' designed and applied to enable a common approach. In parallel, however, a certain degree of flexibility is needed to respond to local labour market needs and to locally available services. Innovative approaches, such as local experimentation (with a bottom-up approach, engagement of civil society, etc.), may be rolled out and scaled up if proven to be successful.

To sum up, when designing labour market integration policies for refugees and asylum seekers, it is recommended:

- To start as early as possible with interventions facilitating the labour market integration of refugees and asylum seekers, in particular, for those asylum seekers with a high chance of staying in the host country;
- To apply targeted approaches for female refugees and asylum seekers to better respond to their specific needs and to enable them to use their potential in order to support the integration of their children and the whole family;
- To implement individualised approaches (courses in the language of the refugees' home country, service provision that address individual needs, such as childcare services);
- To design combined measures that support different aspects at the same time, such as language training and work experience. These measures assist in the move away from 'linear approaches' and are useful to facilitate a quicker labour market integration;
- To enable for cooperative approaches between actors responsible for qualification and skills validation, training and labour market programmes measures;
- To ensure vertical and horizontal coordination of measures between the various stakeholders involved in order to make best use all available resources; and
- To enable for innovative approaches, such as local experimentation that may be rolled out and scaled up if proven to be successful.

