



VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING: BRIDGING REFUGEE AND EMPLOYER NEEDS

Results of a 2016 Cedefop-OECD survey
on integration through skilling and qualification

Over the past two years, Europe has received an unprecedented number of refugees and asylum seekers. Close to 2.5 million new asylum seekers were registered in the European Union (EU) in 2015 and 2016. Many of these are here to stay and the European Union needs to ensure that they enter the labour market and become self-reliant as quickly as possible.

However, social and economic integration are impeded by a number of factors, such as migrants' traumatic experiences, weak attachment to host country, and lack of information on job opportunities. Problems with recognition of skills and qualifications are an issue for those who are unable to prove these. While most of the initial response was geared towards humanitarian help (shelter, basic needs and education of children)



BETTER POLICIES FOR BETTER LIVES

This briefing note is the product of a joint undertaking by the OECD and Cedefop based on the results of a survey carried out by Cedefop's national ReferNet partners.

now comes the time for stepping up the support for integrating refugees and those who are likely to stay.

Vocational education and training (VET) programmes can help connect migrants with the labour market and find jobs matching their skills and qualifications.



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However, considering the growing numbers of both asylum seekers and refugees, there is a need to upscale, adapt and reinvent VET programmes. Efforts to step up education and training provision and broaden access can be observed across the EU, be it through language courses, cultural and ICT training, work-based learning, career guidance, entrepreneurship support, internships or work placements. Many countries have sought to facilitate migrant integration by introducing entirely new features to their systems, including automated self-assessments, fast-track procedures and local community training supported by mentors. Securing sufficient funds and the necessary infrastructure for such measures can be challenging, even for countries with well-developed systems.

Early outreach: key to successful integration

Experience with previous waves of refugees suggests that early support is a major integration driver. It includes speeding up application processing and ensuring early access to integration measures for asylum seekers who are likely to stay. In Germany, while most early support measures are seeking to improve language skills, measures can also comprise assessment and validation of migrants' skills, career guidance and work placements. In Belgium, asylum seekers have access to an array of measures provided by public employment services, including subsidies and training, and can obtain a work permit after four months. Other European countries, such as Austria, Finland, Norway and Sweden, have also made significant efforts to increase early support for recognised refugees.

An appropriate level of proficiency in the host country's language, including specialised vocabulary, is crucial to learning and working. The German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) offers vocational language courses for migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, with high recognition rates. These courses usually comprise advanced vocational language tuition (300 hours) and specialised vocational modules for different occupation fields (300 to 600 hours).

Skills assessment and guidance: first steps to labour market integration

Early assessment of migrants' skills supports labour market matching and potential relocation. Electronic portfolios, such as the ABO integration pilot in Sweden, can be used by asylum seekers to generate a (preliminary) skills profile by way of a mobile app. This

action has inspired Norway to develop a similar system. The Austrian and Swedish public employment services carry out early competence tests in workplace environments for humanitarian migrants; some are in their native languages. For migrants carrying certificates and diplomas, swift recognition of these or establishment of equivalence is critical. In Germany, a comprehensive website and a mobile phone app are available in the most common languages spoken by refugees, to support certificate recognition and subsequent guidance delivered by the regional IQ network. Support for people with incomplete documentation is also fundamental. The validation system in Malmö, Sweden, was initially set up to address the needs of refugees with incomplete documentation; since then it has enlarged its scope. Belgium has also introduced free-of-charge validation procedures for individuals in similar situations.

Fast-tracking asylum seekers with high integration potential into qualifying training courses also allows for better labour market matching and strengthening individual employability. The Swedish government and social partners have developed a comprehensive programme which includes guidance, skills assessment, validation/recognition, work placements, training, apprenticeships and language learning. Currently the programme covers 20 professions.

Guidance, counselling and entrepreneurial training promote autonomy, adaptability, employability and career management skills. Sector-based and entrepreneurial programmes have the potential to help integrate humanitarian migrants. Malta's Institute of Tourism Studies offers both humanitarian migrants and asylum seekers a comprehensive array of services, aiming at supporting the vocational choices and training (secondary and post-secondary) of young people with potential for the tourism sector. In Finland, NGOs are allowed to provide entrepreneurial training and mentoring in welcome centre facilities for asylum seekers who want to develop their own business. Regional authorities are encouraged to identify, develop and retain talents, with a view to local innovation and business creation.

Stakeholder cooperation meets challenges better

Getting relevant parties in a region around a table is essential – and a challenge – for most countries. Refugees need comprehensive information about VET programmes, their benefits, and efforts needed in the short and medium term. Individual guidance is a precondition to obtaining asylum seeker and refugee

buy-in. Local authority staff who counsel migrants and/or offer VET-related and other services need to be trained to respond to their specific needs. Employers also have a key role to play in matching humanitarian migrants' skills and local labour market demand: they know best which occupations are in demand and which skills they require. In Austria, public employment services, NGOs, sector councils and employers share labour market information and promote career guidance and effective work placements for humanitarian migrants. In Germany, local chambers of commerce offer advice and training to small and medium-sized enterprises on work-based learning programmes and internships for asylum seekers and refugees. The initiative is supported by a network of companies with experience in hiring and training humanitarian migrants, or a willingness to do so.

Regional and local stakeholder networks are instrumental to efficient use of available funds. In the Czech Republic, humanitarian migrants have free access to six months' support, including training and retraining measures. To ensure coordination of local efforts, a network of 12 regional support centres was established to coordinate the work of local authorities, NGOs and other stakeholders; it provides information, advice and integration courses, and manages local integration projects jointly funded by the European Social Fund (ESF). In Ireland, close cooperation among local guidance centres, validation and training providers is coordinated by local community development committees under the social inclusion and community activation programme (SICAP). The Italian system for the protection of asylum seekers and refugees (SPRAR) has created a network of so-called second line centres which offer upskilling pathways, leading to secondary level vocational qualifications, for asylum seekers and humanitarian migrants who have been passed through welcome centres. In Finnish cities, different municipal services cooperate to accelerate reception procedures with a view to avoiding skills decay, aiding quick integration into training and other active labour market measures and ensuring subsequent follow-up of asylum seekers and refugees.

At national level, cooperation between ministries needs to be strengthened to ensure smooth handling and dispatching of refugee flows. This does not always prove to be easy.

Transnational stakeholder cooperation also needs to be expanded, including first-entry countries outside the EU. The terms of this cooperation – type of information

countries should exchange, sharing of responsibilities, respecting agreements – need to be clearly defined.

Continuous improvement of programmes and resource management

Regular monitoring of VET programmes and pilot schemes is essential to adapt them to new needs, ensure their quality and impact, and make best use of public funds. Austria and Germany have used piloting as a strategy to mainstream experimental and innovative practices, such as early interventions for asylum seekers. In many European countries, funding VET programmes has become a trade-off between the needs of different groups. Programmes for migrants are often under financial constraints and political and public scrutiny; they are rarely properly evaluated. Regular monitoring and evaluation need to be built into such programmes, to ensure best use of public funds. Raising awareness of European countries' demographic challenges and the refugees' potential role as future workers and social contributors is crucial to securing public support. Refugees should be perceived neither as competing for funds with other groups in need nor as lowering the quality of measures and services offered by VET systems. In the United Kingdom, the 'equal access' campaign is supported by over 30 education institutions and NGOs, raising awareness of asylum seekers' right to be treated equally with natives in access to education and training.

Several EU Member States have tapped the resources of the ESF or other European funds to help finance their national integration programmes. Germany has used ESF joint funding to support its current early outreach programme for asylum seekers and, until 2016, to help finance vocational language courses. Spain has drawn on ESF support to finance a large programme comprising assessment, recognition and validation of refugee skills, guidance and VET provision, coordinated by the Directorate General for Migration. The European Structural and Investment Fund has been used in Estonia to finance language courses for migrants (including humanitarian) in VET courses and higher education. Hungary has made use of the European Regional Development Fund to finance guidance and entrepreneurial support.

Employer commitment is equally important. Swedish employers have been jointly financing fast-track programmes as a social investment. Companies with a migrant integration strategy have obtained public funding to create jobs. The Italian *Pathways* programme

provides financial support to employers offering internships to migrants. Similar programmes are in place in Austria and Bulgaria.

Countries also use various financing schemes to support asylum seekers and refugees undertaking upskilling actions or qualifying training. Slovakia has tapped EU Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund resources to finance skills assessment, guidance, career and entrepreneurial skills development and requalification measures for migrants. In Sweden, some financial tools are managed by municipalities: they can grant support for Swedish language tuition in the workplace, various work-based learning programmes and validation of competences. The United Kingdom offers humanitarian migrants a loans programme which covers VET and work-based learning programmes leading to a qualification.

Better resettlement and relocation through better information sharing

National representatives who responded to the Cedefop-OECD survey seemed to be less concerned with the overall intake of humanitarian migrants by their countries than with their distribution within national territories. To allocate refugees both within and across EU Member States, countries need to

collect and exchange information on the incoming labour force, existing labour demand, and local labour market absorption capacity. Ideally, information on migrant skills profiles should be collected as early as possible, even before departure or while in transit.

Additional pre-departure and in-transit measures, such as guidance, training, work placements and integration plans, are arguably more effective if sector-based. Comprehensive approaches to early outreach require reliable and up-to-date information on destination countries' and regions' skill needs and training offers. This is easier to achieve if there are well-established mechanisms to collect information on needs in sectors associated with clear job and training profiles and a well-identified training offer. Fast-track schemes can accelerate profiling and recognition while lifting limitations on working and learning.

Notwithstanding future developments, this could be a first step towards a more ambitious EU-wide relocation system. Such a system would have to be built on the following principles: clear statement by countries of national labour market needs; early migrant skills profiling to ensure suitable matching; link to national and regional development potential; and systematic exchange of information between countries, aimed at rationalising the distribution of humanitarian migrants across the EU.