

European Inventory

on validation of informal and
non-formal learning



Case Study: Knowledge Centres (*Videnscentre*), Denmark¹

1.1 Introduction

In 2002, the Danish government took the initiative to raise employment levels among migrants in Denmark, in particular of those with no formal education. One of the methods which was identified to have the potential to help achieve this goal was to improve the provision of competence assessment. A considerable body of research revealed that most non-Western migrants had no official documents certifying their education and skills, making it hard to compare their skills with those provided by the education system in Denmark. Moreover, a large part of the migrants had no previous work experience in Denmark, which prevented them from obtaining a recommendation from a Danish employer.

Thus in 2004, following a tendering process from the Ministry of Labour (AMS), five 'Knowledge Centres' were established as a pilot project which would last for three and a half years. The work of the centres focused on enhancing the provision of competence assessment and also on providing migrants with an official document to certify their skills and experience. Although varying across the centres, the main focus was placed on assessing competences in the workplace. One variation was that some centres involved education providers in the competence assessment.

The key stakeholders in the pilot initiative were The Ministry of Labour (AMS) in close co-operation with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Refugee, Immigration and Integration Affairs together with the Danish Confederation of Trade Unions and the Confederation of Employers.

1.2 Target group – main characteristics and rationale for intervention

It is important to clarify that the Knowledge Centres do not work directly with the final beneficiaries of the initiative (unemployed migrants). The client groups of the centres include education institutions, professionals in the field of integration, job centres, those responsible for competence assessment at workplaces (for example, as part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities), vocational education and training (VET) centres and private companies which are subcontractors for delivering public services

¹ All information in this case study is based on interviews with key stakeholders [a representative of the Knowledge Centre Mid-West and a representative of the Ministry of Labour], unless otherwise stated.

under contracts with the public authorities.

As regards the final beneficiaries, these are immigrants with no formal education and/or no previous work experience in Denmark, usually coming from non-Western countries^I. This group does not include asylum seekers.

In 2004, immigrants and their descendants in Denmark accounted for 8.2% of the total population. A large proportion of this group originates from non-Western countries^{II} (70.8% of the immigrant and descendant population), mainly from Turkey and Pakistan. According to projections of the Ministry of Refugee, Immigration and Integration Affairs, the number of immigrants and their descendants is likely to further increase in the coming decades, especially within the 16-64 age group, (i.e the working age population). Despite this increase, the employment rate of non-Western immigrants and their descendants stood only at 47% (against 77% of Danes)^{III}. Additionally, there is a strong gender divide in employment rates, which are usually lower for immigrant women.

Opportunities for foreign nationals to gain a foothold in the Danish labour market largely depend on their educational level (in relation to the Danish system). However, a large proportion of immigrants have not gained any professional qualifications^{IV} in their countries of origin, nor after their arrival in Denmark. Only 35% of the non-Western immigrants in the 25-64 age group have achieved a qualification in their countries of origin, and only 10% of non-Western immigrants have done so after they arrived in Denmark. This is against 66% of Danes who have achieved a professional qualification. The situation improves in the case of descendants of immigrants as 39% of them have achieved a professional qualification. However, this figure still falls short of that of the Danish population.

At the same time, in the past several years, Denmark hit low levels of unemployment and began facing acute skill shortages, especially in those parts of the services sector that cannot be outsourced.

Therefore, as mentioned above, the work of the Knowledge Centres focuses on institutions that deal with immigrants with no formal education and no work experience in Denmark, by encouraging validation and assessment of their competences in the workplace. The output of this process is used not only by the job centres in their assessment of further steps that

^I All those that came to Denmark with previous formal education and corresponding documentation are dealt with by CIRIUS, an authority within the Danish Ministry of Education which is responsible, inter alia, for checking the compatibility of the foreign education certificates with the Danish requirements

^{II} The Western countries comprise all EU/EEA Member States, US, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Andorra, Monaco, San Marino, Switzerland, and the Vatican State. Non-Western countries are all other countries.

^{III} Summary of the statistical publication 'Yearbook on Foreigners in Denmark 2004' published by the Ministry of Refugee, Immigration and Integration Affairs

^{IV} Professional qualifications are understood as completed vocational training or higher education programmes.

need to be taken in order to integrate a given person in the labour market, but also constitute a tangible proof for individuals themselves of their skills and competences.

It must be pointed out that, according to the stakeholders interviewed, the labour market integration of these groups is a long and complex process and does not constitute one-off competence assessment exercise. This exercise is thus viewed as facilitating further steps in the assistance provided to these groups in their labour market integration. The exercise also provides a sound and systematic basis for further recommendations, such as language training or a further vocational training course.

1.3 Structure and role of the Knowledge Centres

There are five Knowledge Centres, covering five regions of Denmark. Each centre is organised according to a different model, since various consortia responded to the tender and were subsequently granted a contract to run the centres. Much of the information for this case study has been taken from an interview with the Knowledge Centre Mid-West. This particular Centre is composed of a services company, a consultancy, a municipality, a language school and a HR company (recruitment). The Mid-West centre is the only Knowledge Centre run by a private company (ISS Facility Services). This company employs approx. 13,000 people and due to a large share of immigrants in its workforce (around 25%) it has considerable experience in integrating immigrants.

Other centres are run by: a vocational training centre, a private consultancy company, a language school (specialising in training immigrants) and a public employment service (at regional level). This variation was intended in order to test how the proposed methodology for working with immigrants would work in different organisational contexts.

Various stakeholders were involved in the development of the methodologies and tools for validation; as well as the members of the consortia that led Knowledge Centres, social partners, companies (HR personnel) and customers (such as job centres) took part. The results from research and institutions' experience also fed into the process of development of methodologies and tools.

Although the Knowledge Centres are organised differently, being run either by a private organisation or by an educational institution, their results and outputs are the same. First of all, they work under the same contract with the Ministry of Labour, and secondly, they remain in regular contact with each other through Steering Group meetings, that involve all consortia, the Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Refugee, Immigration and Integration Affairs.

Each Knowledge Centre employs between five to eight consultants who work as a team.

The main tasks of the team include:

- Preparation of the **overview of the existing methods and organisations** which provide competence assessment. This overview was carried out at regional level and provided information on the methods used for competence assessment and key players / institutions providing it.
- **Providing assistance to jobcentres** on what kind of competence assessment is suitable for the target group. Target groups were recruited through the job centres and consisted of unemployed migrants receiving unemployment assistance (non-European migrants)
- **Developing an online tool** to assist jobcentres¹ in their selection of the best competence assessment method. The online tool was developed in the first stage of the Knowledge Centres pilot project and was finalised in September 2005. It is used nationally by the job centres, solely by the job consultants. It consists of standardised job descriptions that help competence assessment (for more details see next section), a database of results of immigrants undergoing assessment and a comprehensive overview of the initiatives in the field of competence assessment, together with the list of companies that are willing to take an immigrant for an assessment period and, possibly, for further training. The tool was developed by the consortia together with the Ministry of Labour, which coordinated the development of the tool and methodology. Each Knowledge Centre selected other relevant persons (with a human resources or employment background) to participate in the process. The third party contributing to the process was an IT company which assisted in the technical development of the online tool. The tool was first used by the job consultants and the Knowledge Centres then reported on immigrants' reactions to the tool. Before its launch, the tool was tested and amended as a result of two meetings between the Ministry of Labour and the IT company.
- Providing information on validation methods and institutions via a **helpdesk** to customers, such as job consultants in the jobcentres or any other professionals involved in the field of integration and competence assessment.
- **Increase knowledge sharing** on the integration of migrants in the labour market, carried out at various levels and by various organisations through websites, newsletters and dissemination of good practice examples.

These activities are complemented by training and seminars given by the members of the centres to their customers, such as job centres and for the professionals (job consultants) who assist migrants in finding a job. The main subjects of the training sessions were

¹ The online tool was available for job centres only, not the Knowledge Centres other clients. This is because the job centre consultants also have access to data about immigrants. All other services provided by the Knowledge Centres are available to all their clients.

guidance on how to use the online tool, disseminating good practice examples and teaching which methods are the most effective in the integration process.

The Knowledge Centres play a key role in the labour market and integration policies, since they were essentially developed as a part of these policies. Moreover, although originally a pilot project, the Knowledge Centres' results are now to be integrated in the mainstream provision of assistance to migrants with no formal education and/or no prior work experience.

1.4 Competence assessment methodology

The main focus of the Knowledge Centre Mid-West was to bring competence assessment into real life conditions and assess skills and competences in the workplace, where the competences can be demonstrated and where they are normally used. The main reasons for such a choice were: the fact that the vast majority of the target group did not have any previous work experience and the view that the best way to assess a person's skills was to do that in the workplace. Moreover, since most of the immigrants did not have any previous education, assessment by educational institutions was not considered to be as relevant as an assessment by companies¹.

- The unemployed immigrants are referred by consultants at the job centres for a workplace competence assessment, if the consultant decides that there is a need for such an assessment^{II}.
- In the workplace, the right person to conduct the assessment is selected, usually according to internal company rules. Although job consultants are rarely involved in the process, it must be borne in mind that the companies maintain close relationships with the job centres and it is the job consultant that sends the requirement to the company for competence assessment.
- The assessment period takes between three and four weeks during which the beneficiary is assessed during their work.
- After the assessment period is finished, the beneficiary is issued with a 'competence card' which describes actual competences as they are observed. That competence card can be used as a recommendation when looking for another job (or being recommended by a job consultant to on-the-job training).

During the assessment period the immigrants are given support by the job consultants.

¹ Additionally, there are important financial considerations behind this choice – it is less expensive for job centres to refer a client to a workplace assessment than into an education institution.

^{II} It may well be that competence assessment in the workplace is unsuitable and it is more effective to refer the person to the language training course or other services or forms of support.

The methodology which is used in assessing competence is observation. It is carried out in the workplace by a mentor. The process is facilitated by the online tool, mentioned earlier, which specifies which skills and competences are to be assessed for a particular job. The tool contains descriptions for each job and specifies the range of skills that ensure proper execution of tasks envisaged by a given job function. The development of standards was based on the existing national occupational standards. However, the process of constructing job descriptions went further by breaking down the skills and competences into functions. Once these lists of functions had been developed, companies were consulted for their feedback. Despite this consultation, however, there have been some problems with the integration of the standards developed under the Knowledge Centres pilot in the IT system of municipalities, which differs between the municipalities. The process of integrating the descriptions is part of mainstreaming the results of the Knowledge Centres' work (see last section for more details). However, as highlighted by the interviewees, the process should have involved job consultants more, as they are a group who will eventually work with the tool.

The tool functions above all to systematise the process of assessment: the process of assessment is carried out according to the same standards; and the feedback given to institutions and to the learner is standardised and provides a sound and comparable basis for undertaking further steps such as education or language training.

The assessment is carried out by mentors who usually are employees of the same company in which the learner is assessed. It can either be a person who is a HR employee, or a colleague from any other relevant unit. Colleagues who become mentors are first assessed in terms of willingness and ability to conduct a training or assessment of a learner. Then they are offered training on how to be a mentor. Such training and assessment is provided by the companies themselves. Since the assessment is carried out in the workplace, the assessment methodologies have usually been developed as a part of the company's human resource development policy.

During the three to four week assessment period, personal competences as well as professional, language, computer and basic skills; are assessed in relation to the tasks performed. The reason for prioritising these competences was that the employers often perceive immigrant workers as lacking key personal competences needed in a Danish workplace¹. Due to the initial low or no level of education, the types of jobs that are performed are those corresponding to unskilled labour, such as simple cleaning. In some cases, the skills acquired can correspond to qualification levels and are usually complemented by vocational training in an education institution. Whenever the qualification

¹ Mortensen I.Q. (2007). A Danish model for Assessing Competences of Immigrants at the Labour Market, conference material

serves the purpose of getting a person into employment, this option is chosen. This is especially relevant to the social services sector where the demand for labour, especially at lower skill levels, is high and offers a very effective bridge into employment for immigrants.

During the assessment period the employers can be compensated with a wage subsidy for each learner. In many cases learners are offered further training in the company. Then, companies can benefit from training subsidies and the learners are paid a minimum wage for their work.

Upon completion of the assessment period, information about the progress and the assessment results are recorded in an online database (online tool). The same database generates a competence card which specifies which skills and competences a given person has. The document is a useful basis for further job search or for further steps that need to be taken in order to integrate a person into the labour market (such as language or professional training). For job consultants, it is a perfect tool when addressing further companies for training or during an application to access education (especially in the field of social service, either in education institutions or as on-the-job training). For the companies, it is a perfect recruitment tool, which has high credibility because it was assessed in and developed by the companies themselves. As such it is perceived to be more relevant to business requirements, as opposed to some municipality programmes which suffer from low levels of trust among the employers.

Competence cards are issued by the job centres nationally. Although the card is now well-known, our research has identified a strong belief that there needs to be further assistance to all job centres in relation to the use of the card. There is a need to market the card better to the job centres and to the companies, as the use of the competence assessment and the resulting competence cards are not currently obligatory. Issuing competence cards is only one of the methods of providing assistance to the job centre clients.

The development of the online tool has greatly contributed to the systematisation and professionalisation of competence assessment. Previously, competence assessment was carried out in rather an 'ad hoc' manner, with little feedback to the job consultants (at the job centres) and to the learners themselves. Moreover, immigrants had previously no documentation certifying their skills and progress made. The tool, which has taken one year to develop, has already been adjusted following the mid-term evaluation. The adjustments were mostly of a technical nature, to make the tool even more user-friendly.

The system, despite its success, (see next section) has not been without criticism. Mainly the trade unions have underlined that its methods for assessment are too subjective since they may vary across the companies, despite the fact that they are carried out against a standardised format (the catalogue of skills and competences in the online tool). However,

the competence card is felt to be at least a systematisation of the assessment process and a significant step forward in the development of competence assessment methodologies (and process) for that specific target group. Moreover, it provides a learner with standardised and comprehensive feedback, which was not available before. Since the competence card is used as a recommendation and a personal tool for job search, there are always problems with its subjectivity. However, the card presents an employer's impression on how a given person performs and thus may have credibility in the eyes of another employer.

The system is also useful for other target groups which lack professional experience. In fact, these methodologies have already been used by job centres for other groups which lack previous work experience.

The system receives considerable support from employers who first of all are keen to take on new trainees and, secondly, are satisfied with the new standardised tools that minimise their time spent on giving feedback; while at the same time allowing for comparability of the assessment results.

1.5 Outputs and outcomes

To date, approximately 2,000 competence assessments have been carried out, which resulted in less than 1,000 competence cards being issued (data for the period from 2005 to August 2007)^I. The number of assessments averages 100 per month. The reason for the difference between the number of assessments and the competence cards issued is mainly the fact that some competence assessments are not followed by issuing of the card, either because the beneficiary stayed on in employment or training, or they dropped out of the process.

It must be said here that at the time when the Knowledge Centres were set up, Denmark underwent a major restructuring of the public administration which affected the field of employment and welfare, whereby job centres were created in the municipalities, with the aim of providing one-stop-shop services for the unemployed^{II}. This is believed to have impeded successful performance of the pilot action, due to changing roles and initial confusion over the responsibilities of the public authorities. However, at the same time, the final evaluation of the Knowledge Centres was very positive in terms of its effectiveness in such areas as knowledge sharing, dissemination of good practice examples and

^I The first period focused on the development of the online tool (until September 2005)

^{II} In Denmark, the responsibility for people receiving unemployment insurance lies within the Ministry of Labour. People who are receiving welfare payments are dealt with by the municipalities. The reform did not change the responsibilities of these two bodies but integrated the provision under 'one roof'.

improvement of competence assessment methodologies^I. Indeed, the latter is also highlighted by the stakeholders we interviewed, who claim that competence assessment became an important item on the policy agenda and is recognised as separate from competence development, which further improved the methodology for competence assessment.

1.5.1 Sustainability and mainstreaming

The Knowledge Centres will remain operational until December 2007, when they will be closed and the results of their work will be made part of the mainstream provision by the job centres. At present, the Ministry of Labour is setting up a detailed plan on how the results should be anchored within the job centres and a special national service to provide support to immigrants. This service was launched in January 2007 and is aimed at providing job centres with detailed information on four areas: immigrants, equal opportunities, disability and EURES^{II} cooperation. These four units each employ eight people and their task is to support the knowledge of job centres in these areas, through such activities as conferences, visits to job centres and by providing information via a helpdesk. Their funding was envisaged for 3 years - an evaluation in 2008 will decide on whether to continue the service. Therefore, all results of the work of the Knowledge Centres will be transferred to one of the units of the new service for immigrants. The online tool will remain operational; however, one part of the database will be shut down, namely the list of companies which are willing to take on an immigrant for assessment. This move is a result of the evaluation which showed that the database has not been used enough, due to the fact that job centres had their own established contacts with educational institutions and companies.

However, despite the fact that the methodologies developed are of use to other target groups than immigrants, the new service provision will be limited to immigrants only, mainly due to organisational and financial considerations^{III}.

1.6 Conclusions

The competence cards and the competence assessment process have had a lasting impact on the final beneficiaries who feel proud of their own achievements and, in many cases, for the first time in their lives they have documentation certifying their skills and competences. Moreover, they are provided with more comprehensive feedback that

^I Deloitte Business Consulting A/S (2007). Brug for alle kompetencer. Slutevaluering af videnscentre for kompetenceafklaring af flygtninge og indvandre

^{II} European Employment Services

^{III} This includes the structure of the public support system to immigrants and other groups, as well as the fact that there has not been any more finance allocated to mainstreaming the new methods to be used by other groups.

assists them in their job search efforts or in their further training. The progress and further career paths of those undergoing the competence assessment are constantly tracked by the Ministry of Labour. However, the sample to date is too small and the implementation period too short for longer term results to be observed. Thus it is difficult to draw any conclusions on the wider impact of the current results. The Ministry of Labour expects to have more results towards mid-2008 on the longer-term effects of the pilot action.