

NGO NETWORK OF INTEGRATION FOCAL POINTS

POLICY BRIEFING ON THE ASSESSMENT OF SKILLS AND RECOGNITION OF QUALIFICATIONS OF REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS IN EUROPE

'I am a graduate from the university and I am sweeping the floor. I know that I am not alone in that situation.'



In 2004, the European Council adopted the Common Basic Principles (CBP) on Immigrant Integration and in 2005, in its Communication A Common Agenda for Integration, the Commission developed these principles into a framework with action points at national and European levels.¹ This policy briefing relates to the implementation of CBP 3: 'Employment is a key part of the integration process and is central to the participation of immigrants, to the contributions immigrants make to the host society, and to making such contributions visible', and CBP 5: 'Efforts in education are critical to preparing immigrants, and particularly their descendants, to be more successful and more active participants in society'

and in particular the action points:

- 'Exploring additional ways of recognising newcomers' qualifications, training and/or professional experience, building upon existing laws and
- Facilitating transparent recognition of qualifications, notably through proposals for a European Qualifications Framework.'

Due to problems with recognition of their qualifications, skills and work experience, many refugees and migrants end up unemployed or underemployed. Many highly-skilled refugees and migrants are working in low-skilled, temporary and badly paid jobs. A loss not only for the affected persons, but also the receiving societies and their economies.

Problems relating to the assessment of skills and recognition of qualifications apply to both refugees and migrants, although refugees are confronted with even more obstacles. Migrants can prepare for the recognition process in the country they choose to live and work. Refugees often leave in a hurry without knowledge of their final destination. They are not always able to bring all their diplomas and certificates with them and/or cannot access the institutions in their host countries that issued their documents. Refugees are more often confronted with these problems because, compared to other immigrants, a larger proportion tend to have higher educational and professional backgrounds.

Experience in countries such as Finland, the Netherlands, and the UK shows that when migrants' and refugees' qualifications are recognised and/or if they have the opportunity to update their skills and knowledge by undertaking additional training or education, they are more likely to find suitable and long-term employment – matching their skills and qualifications.

Recommendations for the European Common Agenda on Integration

THE EU DIRECTIVE ON THE RECOGNITION OF QUALIFICATIONS

The EU Directive on the recognition of qualifications² makes it possible for EU nationals who obtained their professional qualifications in one or more Member States to pursue their profession in other Member States. This Directive is beneficial for those professionals who are EU nationals wishing to relocate within the EU, but it is perceived as discriminatory by professionals from non EU Member States. The latter will have to go through usually lengthy, bureaucratic and expensive recognition procedures, even when they obtained their qualification in another EU country.

The EU Directive on the recognition of qualifications should be extended to third country nationals who have long-term residency.³ At the same time, the Long Term Residence Directive⁴ should be amended to include refugees and persons with a subsidiary form of protection.

RECOGNITION OF QUALIFICATIONS PROCEDURES

Not all EU Member States have a sufficient legal framework in place to deal with the recognition of qualifications of third country nationals. In all EU Member States the recognition procedures for regulated professions⁵ are generally lengthy, bureaucratic and expensive. Diplomas for non-regulated professions tend to be evaluated at different levels by different universities and National Recognition Information Centres (NARICs). However, they tend to be generally assessed (much) less than EU diplomas. Across Europe, refugees have additional problems because they are not always able to bring all their diplomas with them.

All Member States should have a legal framework in place for the recognition of third country qualifications. Within this framework recognition procedures must be fast, transparent, simple, easily accessible, and free of charge. Alternative assessment methods such as exams to prove prior knowledge and working experience, inclusion of alternative documents and interviews to clarify previous education, should be (further) developed.

ADAPTING SKILLS AND QUALIFICATIONS TO THE RECEIVING SOCIETY

Refugees and migrants generally agree that it is necessary to adapt or upgrade their knowledge and skills to the working standards and culture in the receiving society.⁶ This is even more pertinent for refugees who often have been unable to work for years due to their situation of exile and lengthy asylum procedures. In most Member States, there is a lack of suitable training courses that meet the learning needs of these professionals. They often need to go back to university and follow similar courses again to get the same degree in the receiving country. This takes years and is often impossible because of financial difficulties. In addition, there is a lack of information and professional assistance to advise migrants and refugees on suitable progression routes.

Member States should promote and facilitate better cooperation between professional bodies, training providers and universities in order to provide training courses to upgrade qualifications tailored to the needs of third country nationals. The relevant service providers should ensure adequate information and assistance for diploma equivalence and progression routes to training and education that takes into account their skills level. For refugees, financial support is essential to enable them to follow additional training.

ASSESSMENT OF SKILLS, QUALIFICATIONS AND WORK EXPERIENCES

Many migrants and refugees feel that employers undervalue their qualifications, skills and work experiences. Various EU Member States are developing systems (e.g. Accreditation of Prior (Experiential) Learning – AP(E)L) to make the value of people's skills and experience more visible to employers. At European level, there are initiatives such as Europass and the development of a European Qualifications Framework that should make qualifications and competences more comparable and compatible throughout the EU. So far such initiatives have not yet (fully) included third country nationals as a target group.⁷

Qualifications of third country nationals should be included in the development of a European Qualifications Framework. All Member States should have skills audits in place to assess the competences of third country nationals and portfolio building should be further developed as a tool to assess skills, experience and qualifications as soon as possible after arrival in the host country. Skills audits should lead to formal certificates, which can be used for the purposes of further education, vocational training or searching for a job.

¹See Council Conclusions, Immigrant Integration Policy in the European Union, 14615/04 of 19 November 2004 and the Communication from the European Commission on A Common Agenda for Integration – Framework for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals in the European Union, September 2005, COM (2005) 389.

²See the EU Council Directive 2005/36/EC of 7 September 2005 on the recognition of professional qualifications.

³This proposal is in line with the Commission's Communication on immigration, integration and employment, COM(2003) 336 final, and the opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee, ECOSOC Opinion (SOC/113), of 18 September 2002 on the Proposal of the European Parliament and of the Council on the recognition of professional qualifications, (COM(2002)119 final).

⁴See the EU Council Directive 2003/109/EC of 25 November 2003 concerning the status of third-country national who are long-term residents.

⁵Professions regulated by a professional body, for example medicine, dentistry, law. Some professions are regulated in one country but not in another.

⁶See Education Action International's Report Resource Project – Refugees' Contribution to Europe, February 2004.

⁷The European Thematic Group for Asylum Seekers (ETG5) of the EQUAL programme gathered expertise from different countries including the UK, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Denmark, showing the benefits that skills audits can bring for asylum seekers. See: http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/equal/activities/etg5_en.cfm

Examples of good practice

BELGIUM

A pilot project by the Flemish Refugee Council showed the need for adequate information and assistance with diploma equivalence. Such assistance clearly had a positive influence on the chances of the applicants for obtaining a positive decision on their recognition. Analyses showed that people who had an equivalence of their foreign diploma were more often employed according to their level of education. For more information: <http://www.vluchtelingenwerk.be>

THE NETHERLANDS

The University Assistance Fund (UAF) supports about 2500 refugee students each year. Over 70% of the refugee students who graduate find a suitable job within a year. For more information: www.uaf.nl

SWITZERLAND

The integration project Cocomo (Coaching, Coordination, Mobilisation) offers skills assessment, practical training/mentoring at the workplace, and unlimited engagement of refugees in Zürich. The project BIRD develops activities to assess skills and professional qualification, and when necessary tries to get them recognised. For more information: www.cocomo.ch; www.bird-ge.ch

UNITED KINGDOM

The Refugee Education Training and Advisory Service from Education Action International gives expert advice and guidance on professional re-qualification for refugees and has a successful programme to support refugee medical doctors with the re-qualification process and procedures. For more information: www.education-action.org

This policy briefing has been produced by the NGO Network of Integration Focal Points, which brings together 28 non-governmental organisations in 19 European countries in the refugee and migration field with the aim of advocating for better integration policies and practices for refugees and migrants in Europe. The Network is coordinated by the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) in liaison with Caritas Europa. The Network was established in June 2005 and received financial support from the European Commission (INTI preparatory Actions 2004) and the Network of European Foundations (European Programme for Integration and Migration) from September 2006 to February 2007.

This policy briefing is part of a series of six on the integration of refugees and migrants in Europe addressing the following topics: Housing; Introduction and language courses; Assessment of skills and recognition of qualifications; Vocational training and (higher) education; Employment and employment support; and Civic and political participation.

The European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) is an umbrella organisation for cooperation between almost 80 European non-governmental organisations in 31 countries concerned with refugees. For more information: www.ecre.org

Caritas Europa is one of the seven regions of Caritas Internationalis, a confederation of 162 Catholic relief, development and social service organisations working to build a better world, especially for the poor and oppressed, in over 200 countries and territories. For more information: www.caritas-europa.org

For more information on both organisations' positions on refugee/migrant integration:

ECRE's The Way Forward: Europe's role on the global refugee protection system – 'Towards the Integration of Refugees in Europe', July 2005

Caritas Europa's Integration – A process involving all, March 2004

FRONT COVER: This quote has been taken from ECRE's Refugee Stories project, which relates the experience of men and women who have sought sanctuary in one of 12 EU countries over the past ten years. More information: www.ecre.org/refugeestories/

DESIGN: barry@lowenhoff2.demon.co.uk