

European Network of Public Employment Services

'Labour Market Integration of Refugees' – Key Considerations

Endorsed by the PES Network Board, updated November 2018

The recent inflow of asylum seekers calls for innovative approaches to integrate refugees into the labour market, and PES are at the forefront of this challenge. Many refugees are staying in European countries at least for the medium-term; therefore, entering the labour market is key to their successful integration into these societies. It is not only essential for the purpose of autonomous and independent living, but it can also address other needs that many refugees might have: it improves language skills, increases cultural awareness, builds local and social networks, increases social participation and improves physical and mental health. From a 'PES perspective', four key aspects are of particular importance for the (labour market) integration of refugees:

- Language
- Skills and qualifications
- Partners and institutions
- Employers

Although the situations throughout Europe vary greatly, there are many common challenges and considerations for PES when it comes to integrating refugees. The pursuit of successful labour market integration of refugees impacts on PES services and resources. And while at first, mainly the PES experience an increase in service costs, this needs to be treated as long-term investment for European societies as a whole. Well-designed services can deliver high returns on the labour market, enable refugees to use their skills and qualifications in European labour markets and therewith address demographic challenges and skill shortages in some sectors.

Efficient cooperation between PES and different actors and the timing, as well as the sequencing of support they jointly deliver are important: they offer refugees personalised services that address their needs and help them to enter the labour market. PES play a key role here, as they often coordinate the integration path of refugees or cooperate with other actors at some point in the process.

The extent to which labour market integration of refugees has influenced PES services and resources depends on the national context. PES also differ in terms of their approaches, i.e. applying universal PES services to refugees versus developing and applying more individualised, tailor made or targeted approaches for this specific target group. PES in many countries are experiencing that factors such as starting integration support measures as early as possible, as well as information sharing and cooperation with relevant organisations may improve efficiency and be essential elements for successful labour market integration.

This short paper introduces key considerations for PES on this subject and encompasses language training, ideally combined with work practice, tools to assess formal and informal skills and qualifications, a targeted and work-focused provision of training and education and close cooperation with employers. While some examples illustrate the progress that some PES have made, many PES have only recently started to develop or adopt measures for the specific labour market integration of refugees.

Language

Language skills are the first step towards labour market integration as they enable and motivate refugees and asylum seekers to interact with future employers, public institutions and the wider society in which they want to integrate.

Language training should not hold a person back from finding work and participate in society, but rather be combined with work experience (internships, apprenticeships, volunteering). Therefore, timing, length, flexibility of provision (format and times in the day) of language training and the combination of language training with work-related experiences or services are important aspects to consider for PES. In addition, engaging with employers is important to facilitate on-the-job language learning that goes along with the vocational skills a refugee or asylum seeker might need.

Key consideration 1: Language training should be tailored to the personal situation, skills and qualifications of the individual refugee and combined with work practice.

Practice Zooms from PES in Europe:

Belgium: 'Learning Dutch on the work floor' is a project that provides language training and support in companies and not only involves teachers, but also co-workers. The aim is to align language skills with professional skills. In addition, PES Belgium-Flanders (VDAB) offers a work coach to support communication between the foreign speakers and their Dutch co-workers so that co-workers are actively involved. This ultimately supports sustainable integration at the work place.

Germany: PES Germany (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, BA) has created various possibilities for combining labour market policy measures with language acquisition. This means that language acquisition and the integration into the labour or vocational training market, can take place in parallel, thus avoiding waiting times between measures and accelerating the integration processes.

Key consideration 2: For 'work-ready' individuals, flexible on-the-job/combined language training would ideally be available to make 'work first' pathways a true and sustainable alternative for refugees.

Practice Zoom from PES in Europe:

Denmark: The 'staircase' model aims to identify individual's skills for labour market integration. The identification of skills is combined with Danish language lessons and through work practice as a part of the integrative training programme in Danish companies.

Skills and qualifications

Lack of information on qualifications and skills, makes it difficult for any PES to plan and provide services, let alone engage with employers. A large proportion of refugees come to Europe without documentation of their qualifications, which makes recognising pre-existing skills and qualifications a difficult exercise for PES. The aim is to adequately reflect and recognise acquired skills so that the refugees do not risk being unduly classified as 'unskilled' which again may discourage hiring by employers. Two aspects are particularly important: i) assessing skills effectively - whether these are formal or informal skills, hard or soft skills - considering which institution does the assessment at what time of the integration process and in what way; and ii) identifying and recognising qualifications appropriately - whether these are vocational qualifications or university degrees - considering which institution is responsible for this and which qualifications are 'recognised' / 'transferrable'.

For PES, it is key to have tools in place (or available to them) that help them assess skills, recognise existing qualifications, support the acquisition of further skills and qualifications, and ultimately help to better match refugees with employment opportunities. The development of these tools and the provision of training depend on the national / sectoral educational and vocational systems, and some national systems might be more flexible than others. Therefore, PES also apply different approaches to assessing skills: they vary from self-assessments by refugees, assessments by job counsellors or technology-based systems to determine skills.

Key consideration 3: Cooperation between PES and the educational, vocational system and social partners is essential to determine if skills and qualifications can be acquired through the PES, through the education system or in employment. Cultural differences, staff capacities and competences need to be considered in all approaches to assess skills and qualifications.

Practice Zooms from PES in Europe:

Austria: The PES in Vienna started a 'competence check' in August 2015, which is a survey for refugees to assess their skills, qualifications and their language knowledge. The measure is also offered in the mother tongue of the refugees involved (Farsi-Dari, Arabic) and it lasts for five weeks for men and seven weeks for women. The aim is to recognise refugees' skills and qualifications and define any additional needs for qualifications, as well as to provide information about employment and the Austrian education system. The measure was rolled out in 2016 and it is offered by every local PES office in the federal provinces. There is not a standardised format as every local office carries out the competence check taking into account the specific circumstances in the respective federal provinces.

Germany: Vocational competence tests, 'MYSKILLS'¹, was launched in 2016 in order to identify the competencies and work-relevant skills of refugees and migrants. There are different multilingual tests for around 30 different professions that use pictures and videos to assess the job-relevant skills of refugees, as well as domestic low-qualified jobseekers with work experience. It aims to make informal or non-formal learning (competencies) visible and usable for job entry and it enables further training.

Sweden: The early mapping of competences by the Swedish PES is possible through the use of multi-lingual, online guides on different occupations in order to help refugees assess

¹ See also PES practice 'Myskills – Recognising professional competences' (2017), available here: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=18693&langId=en>

their own skills and qualifications against these occupations. This covers the following sectors: property maintenance, catering, transport, cleaning, care, commerce and technology. The guides were developed together with employers' organisations, and PES counsellors can assist refugees in using the guides.

Key consideration 4: Creating labour market 'fast-tracks' for work-ready or highly skilled asylum seekers and refugees is valuable. This requires close collaboration with employers and the education sector to define 'work-readiness', in order to recognise qualifications and provide adequate job opportunities, or to adapt on-the-job training schemes (such as apprenticeships, internships, work placements, etc.).

Practice Zoom from PES in Europe:

Belgium: Local Welfare Agencies (OCMW), the Agencies for Civic Integration and PES Belgium-Flanders (VDAB) provide integrated reception points for refugees and asylum seekers with higher educational degrees, knowledge of Dutch, German, French or English and from countries with high likelihood of recognition. They are offered rapid skills assessment and are directed to job related activities, instead of civic integration and language courses. After a pilot project phase the reception points for refugees and asylum seekers with higher educational degrees will be further developed and imbedded into the service provision of PES Belgium-Flanders (VDAB).

Partners and institutions

How and when services are provided by a range of actors in close collaboration determines the path that a refugee takes towards employment. Refugees need support from various actors, as they often face multiple barriers for labour market integration, such as insufficient language skills, challenges related to skills assessment and recognition of qualifications. Experiences of traumatic events or a lack of knowledge about institutional or cultural arrangements may complicate further. Systematic and effective cooperation between PES and relevant organisations (municipalities, migration offices, NGOs, social partners) is essential to address these barriers and achieve one common goal: the successful integration into society.

When it comes to cooperation and sequencing of support, the role of the PES varies across European countries. Some PES play an active role as the coordinator of services, and some PES contribute at a later stage. In most cases, PES cooperate with agencies working across different governance levels (national, regional, local) or/and with agencies that are not 'business as usual' for the PES (such as migration offices or the police). It is therefore important to determine effective ways of sequencing and timing services, along with formal, operational agreements on collaboration and data sharing to avoid demotivation and devaluation of skills of the refugees.

Key consideration 5: Information sharing arrangements between institutions improve efficiency, and PES should work with other actors to establish well-functioning processes and define roles in order to cater for different needs in the timing and sequencing of services. The overall aim would be to provide support as early as possible and address other needs that are equally crucial for employment (e.g. health care, housing, language).

Practice Zooms from PES in Europe:

Germany: Twenty-four reception centres² across Germany enhance the cooperation between PES, the federal office for recognition of refugees (BMAF), Federal States (Bundesländer) and municipalities in order to combine steps in the asylum procedure and to provide measures of labour market integration as early as possible. Asylum applications for refugees who come from countries with a high or low likelihood of asylum recognition are assessed within 48 hours. People with a high likelihood of recognition already receive PES counselling and information on integration courses provided by the BMAF *during* the asylum procedure. This model enabled better sequencing and data sharing around individual steps in the asylum application procedure. This also facilitates a quicker validation of qualifications and competences and language skills assessment. This results in more appropriate training courses for individuals that accelerate the integration process.

Norway: The Integration Programme for refugees provides functional cooperation between integration authorities, PES, health authorities, educational institutions etc. Close cooperation with employers ensures better job opportunities and may sometimes result in early exit from the Introduction Programme to the labour market.

Key consideration 6: Social networks of refugees and local labour market needs, as well as learning about cultural aspects of the host country are important factors in the integration

² See also PES practice 'Integrated labour market services for asylum seekers in arrival centres' (2018), available here: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=19255&langId=en>

path from reception centres to independent employment. Close cooperation with municipalities can help to plan services and to maximise local skills matches.

Practice Zoom from PES in Europe:

Finland: The integration training (3-5 years) has changed to a more flexible and personal approach, including modules of language studies (also 'vocational language') and Finnish culture, vocational education, training for entrepreneurship, voluntary work, distance learning and voluntary learning between official training modules and work-related measures, e.g. work placements, job search and integration training in a vocational training environment. Many regions have also included a 4 to 6 week orientation module in the language of individual refugees when tendering integration training. Vocational oriented language training based on labour market needs is an important content of the integration training. This currently covers the vocational language in the hotel and catering industry; manufacturing; construction and building; health and care; and software development.

Norway: A fast track access to the labour market for refugees is agreed between the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities and the social partners. The aim is to facilitate good job brokerage arenas within selected industries where labour shortages are identified. Providing financial measures to employers will reduce their risk of hiring labour force and thereby give job opportunities to 'job-ready' candidates or to those who only need very short qualification measures to become ready for the job market.

Spain: A network called ARIADNA has been established. This is composed of NGO's (ACCEM, CEAR, Red Spanish Cross, The Mercy Migrations) and four Reception Centres for Refugees (CAR), which depends on the Ministry of Employment and Social Security. The main aim of the network is to promote labour integration of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection. In addition, two specific aims are contemplated: to inform refugees about the socio-economic local reality in order to develop the integration path, and to provide tools that allow social and cultural conviviality with the reception society. The main activities are divided in two groups: direct actions to beneficiaries (vocational training, self-employment) and complementary actions (awareness, transnationality and staff training).

Employers

Close collaboration between PES and employers is crucial to successful labour market integration of refugees. Finding a relevant job for a refugee in a company with recruitment needs is a win-win for both employers and jobseekers.

Adequate conversations, tailored support programmes and adapted skills requirements are pivotal to a successful relationship between PES and employers. Understanding labour shortages and employers' needs in the labour market helps PES to review and adapt training, service provision and job matching. A large proportion of refugees will become future labour force, so understanding where workforce and skills are needed is essential to address skills gaps and help refugees integrate faster.

Good quality information and successful matching of skills and jobs provided by PES sets a precedent with employers, especially in the current refugee context. Early and accurate job matching is important to encourage employers during the hiring process and afterwards.

Key consideration 7: Employer engagement is necessary to facilitate on-the-job skills acquisition. This helps the PES and the refugee in two ways: it allows the person to become self-reliant and directs away from depending on the PES, and it exposes the person to working culture and working language. This is therefore beneficial for everyone and enhances the sustainability of job placements.

Practice Zoom from PES in Europe:

Sweden: The Fast Track Initiative³ for Newly Arrived Migrants focuses on the provision of skills and the creation of fast tracks to enable newly arrived migrants a more efficient transition into occupations corresponding to their education, experiences and interests. The aim is to coordinate existing PES measures into a streamlined trajectory for newly arrived migrants with skills that match occupations where there are labour shortages. The Swedish PES invites social partners and other agencies to create fast track initiatives in various sectors; the first 14 fast track initiatives were launched in various sectors and covered approximately 40 professions.

Norway: Public and private companies can apply for grants to establish systems for mentoring at the work place. The immigrant will get access to the labour market, career development opportunities and a better usage of their own competence, in addition to strengthening their network, as well as to get insight and knowledge about different industries and companies.

Germany: Many companies in Germany, regardless of their size, want to get involved with refugees through offering internships, vocational training and employment. In addition to placing suitable applicants for vacant job and vocational training positions, PES Germany also offers employers a comprehensive range of counselling services. The (joint) employer services advise, among other things, on the basic prerequisites and framework conditions for the employment of refugees as well as on funding opportunities. The employer services also help to reduce uncertainties and reservations, as well as raising awareness of a welcome culture in companies.

³ See also PES practice 'Fast tracks initiative for newly arrived immigrants' (2017), available here: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=18318&langId=en>