

NGO NETWORK OF INTEGRATION FOCAL POINTS

# POLICY BRIEFING ON ACCESS TO VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND (HIGHER) EDUCATION FOR REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS IN EUROPE.

'I'm excited for when I finish my training. I'll be relieved. Even if I won't know if I will be allowed to work. My training is something that no one can take away from me.'

**ECRE**



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**I**n 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.<sup>1</sup> This policy briefing relates to the implementation of CBP 5: 'Efforts in education are critical to preparing immigrants, and particularly their descendents, to be more successful and more active participants in society' and CBP 3: 'Employment is a key part of the integration process and is central to the participation of immigration, to the contributions immigrants make to the receiving society, and to making such contributions visible' and in particular the action points:

- 'Improving the participation of young migrants in higher education' (CBP 5);
- 'Informing employers and educational institutions about certificates for introduction courses to promote access to the labour market or training opportunities' (CBP3);
- 'Supporting training capacities of small companies, business organisations and trade unions in sectors of the economy employing many migrants' (CBP3);

Employment is acknowledged to be one of the most crucial areas for integration. While the CBPs pay particular respect to enhancing the opportunities of migrant entrepreneurship, there is not enough emphasis on education and training that leads to qualified employment. Here, the CBPs need to be seen in conjunction with each other: education, recognition of skills and qualifications, service provision by private and public bodies, language training and vocational training all need to be cross referenced to ensure that they do not form an end in themselves, but work together to enable labour market participation of refugees and migrants according to their skills and qualifications.

Vocational training, education and language tuition should be seen as facilitators in the process of achieving suitable employment. But they also have a role to play in terms of refugee and migrant empowerment more generally. Developing new skills, especially the language skills to communicate well in the host society, enables refugees and migrants to be active in their own integration.

There are many barriers to successful schooling, and subsequent vocational training or higher education, including institutional restrictions preventing access, a lack of or inadequate financial support and a lack of information about the education system and training courses. Asylum seekers, refugees and migrants face similar problems in terms of access to vocational training and (higher) education, but restrictions in place often have the greatest impact on asylum seekers. Being barred from participating in education and training courses while their claim for asylum is being decided means in many cases lost years in terms of finding work and making a living once a decision has been reached.

## Recommendations for the European Common Agenda on Integration

### ACCESS TO TRAINING AND EDUCATION

Access to vocational training and the education system is crucial for refugees and migrants to enable them to adapt their skills and qualifications to the labour market requirements of receiving countries. In most countries, refugees do not have access to vocational training or the education system while their asylum claim is being decided<sup>2</sup> and also, for people who have subsidiary forms of international protection, access to vocational training can be restricted.<sup>3</sup>

*Asylum seekers and persons with subsidiary forms of international protection should be given unrestricted access to vocational training and the education system.*

### A WAY OUT OF THE POVERTY TRAP

In most EU countries, government policies focus on trying to get refugees and migrants into any kind of employment as soon as possible, aiming to make people self-sufficient and independent of state support. In practice this often leads to a situation where skilled migrants and refugees end up working in low skilled, temporary and badly paid jobs. The need to make a living and lack of financial support prevent them from participating in vocational training and (higher) education, which would help them to escape this poverty trap and eventually find employment commensurate with their skills and qualifications.

*In their integration strategies, Member States should develop mechanisms that facilitate refugees' and migrants' access to suitable training and education, for example by granting them permission to study (for a reasonable period of time) without losing social benefits, scholarship programmes or facilitating the possibility to work and study part-time.*

### PREPARATION FOR STUDY

Adequate language skills are essential for refugees and migrants to be able to access mainstream education or vocational training programmes. However, the existing language provision is often insufficient to enable them to reach the necessary entry levels. In countries such as the UK and the Netherlands, refugees and migrants can follow a so-called transition year (also called a preparatory, pre-university, or language and transition course). This year consists of extra language classes (including sometimes language courses adapted to specific academic or professional language) and other necessary subjects and gives them the opportunity to get used to the

host countries' education system. Following a preparatory year significantly reduces the dropout rate.

Member States should ensure that language courses are sufficiently available, adequate and affordable to enable refugees and migrants to reach the level necessary to access further training or education. Educational institutions should cooperate in organising preparatory courses in order to achieve a successful intake of refugee and migrant students and prevent dropout during studies. Furthermore, affordable intensive language courses adapted to specific academic or professional language may also be needed to enable refugees and migrants to enter courses in their field of profession.

#### **ADVICE AND GUIDANCE**

Information and individual advice and guidance services are essential to assist refugees and migrants in finding their way in the education system. Advice is necessary to support them with choosing the right course and exploring options for financial support, childcare etc. In addition, staff of service providers (in particular employment offices) should take more account of refugees' and migrants' previous educational and professional backgrounds and consider their specific training needs, the available courses and support services, and refer them accordingly.

Member States should ensure that refugees and migrants have access to adequate information and individual advice and guidance (for example through a system of case workers) on vocational training and educational opportunities. Staff of the relevant service providers (in particular employment services) should receive training on the specific needs of refugees and migrants and ensure that they are referred to progression routes to training and education that take into account their skills level.

#### **RE-TRAINING OPTIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS**

Migrants and in particular refugees with professional backgrounds often face major difficulties in accessing the same profession because their diplomas are not, or only partially, recognised. Recognition procedures for regulated professions are often bureaucratic, expensive and time-consuming and, in most cases, the outcome is that additional training is necessary to re-qualify. Unfortunately, in most Member States, possibilities to follow the necessary training courses that meet the learning needs of these professionals are limited.

Member States and training providers should create opportunities for refugees and migrants to follow suitable training in a learned profession or sector in order to allow them to re-qualify and adapt their skills and experience to the receiving country's labour market requirements.

#### **INVOLVE EMPLOYERS**

Many employers are not sufficiently aware of the skills and economic potential of refugees and migrants. Vocational training should be well coordinated with labour market needs and at the same time be in accordance with the refugees' and migrants' educational and professional levels. In order to lead to employment, vocational training should be especially targeted in fields where there is a labour market shortage. Representatives of employers should be included in vocational training initiatives.

Employers, especially the private sector should be included in vocational training initiatives. Programmes can only be successful if upon completion jobs are available. This requires the awareness and cooperation of the private sector.

<sup>1</sup>See 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.

<sup>2</sup>Article 11 of the Council Directive 2003/9/EC of 27 January 2003 laying down minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers stipulates that Member States must grant conditional access to vocational training and the labour market after a maximum of 12 months of waiting for a first instance decision. This is a minimum standard and Member States are free to establish more favourable provisions. From February 2005 all Member States were bound to have implemented this rule.

<sup>3</sup>Article 26 of the Council Directive 2004/83/EC of 29 April 2004 on the minimum standards for the qualification and status of third country nationals or stateless persons as refugees or as persons who otherwise need international protection and the content of protection granted allows Member States to restrict access to employment-related education opportunities for adults, vocational training and workplace experience for beneficiaries who have subsidiary forms of international protection.

## EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

### THE NETHERLANDS

The University Assistance Fund (UAF) supports about 2500 refugee students each year. Apart from guidance and (financial) assistance, transition years to prepare foreign speaking students for their studies in the Netherlands are also offered, which reduces dropout rates. For more information: [www.uaf.nl](http://www.uaf.nl)

### BELGIUM

A pilot project by the Flemish Refugee Council provides special guidance and assistance to refugees and asylum-seekers who want to start or continue higher education studies in Flanders. For more information: [www.vluchtelingenwerk.be](http://www.vluchtelingenwerk.be)

### ITALY

A study by Marco Lombardi entitled 'Percorsi di integrazione degli immigrati e politiche attive del lavoro' shows that it is important to organise programmes involving a network of different actors to address all the different needs of students (like transportation and housing). For more information: [www.ismu.org](http://www.ismu.org).

### PORTUGAL

The Portuguese Refugee Council together with the vocational centre "Centro de Formação Profissional para o Sector Alimentar" (CFPSA) started a pilot project under EQUAL II to integrate asylum seekers in vocational training courses in the restaurant and hotel sector, as these are areas with a shortage of workers in Portugal. For more information: <http://viaas.refugiados.net/a1.html>

### SPAIN

Public institutions, sometimes in collaboration with NGOs, provide skill-training courses to third country nationals (including refugees) that already have some knowledge of the Spanish language. Moreover, there are agreements between NGOs and private companies to provide vocational training for immigrants followed by a job contract in that company.

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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](http://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](http://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/](http://www.ecre.org/refugeestories/)

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