

Asylum seekers qualify to help others

Imagine you are in a country where you do not speak the language and you need to see a doctor. What would you do? Try to find someone who could accompany you and help translate? This could prove more difficult than it sounds. Medical terminology is not that easy and it may be very hard to explain the exact problem, not to mention understanding the doctor's response. Asylum seekers may also be traumatised and have difficulties expressing what the problem is, even in their own language. This is a situation many asylum seekers end up in when they arrive in a new country, and just one problem they face in access to social and healthcare services.

Knowing the language is just the starting point for integrating in a new society and finding work. For many asylum seekers getting a job is extremely difficult, since language is not the only obstacle they face. There may also be strict requirements for obtaining a work permit, as in Germany.

The TransSPuk Development Partnership, led by the Regional Office Berg City Triangle Remscheid Solingen Wuppertal, has established a new profession by creating a qualification for asylum seekers to become language and cultural mediators in the public health and social services sectors. In Germany, there is an urgent need for this type of work. According to a study at Berlin Charité hospital, just 1% of asylum seeker patients had access to professional interpretation. In other cases patients had to make themselves understood with the help of relatives – often children – or support staff, like cleaners. This can result in low quality of treatment of patients from migrant backgrounds, 'doctor shopping' and in the long run, increasing costs in the health care system.

Gaining a qualification, improving integration

The new profession of "cultural and language mediator", combining specific skills and language knowledge, paves the way for asylum seekers to gain a qualification while contributing to their new society and assisting other asylum seekers.

Asylum seekers are perfectly placed to do the job because of their rich linguistic and cultural backgrounds. By creating a qualification in which they learn about the social system and other features of German society, TransSPuk found an excellent way to improve asylum seekers'

chances of getting a job and integrating in their host country. At the same time it serves to enhance efficiency and decrease costs in the health and social service sectors.

The qualification developed by TransSPuk starts with two years' class-room education, followed by a one-year internship. Asylum seekers learn about Germany's social system and administration, cultural differences, computing and the German language. The practical training consists of internships in at least four different work environments, such as social and welfare services, clinics and hospitals. The final certificate they gain is of use not only in Germany, but also in case they return to their home countries.

Opening up to new cultures

The project has resulted in an increased awareness of asylum seekers and their needs. Both asylum seekers and staff got to know new cultures and the institutions became more open to other cultures and concepts. In fact, the various employers where asylum seekers undertook internships deemed the project so successful that they are now pushing for others to participate.

Varinia Morales of TransSPuk says "A lot of time has been invested in the project, but the outcomes have been great – once the ball got rolling a lot of positive things came out of it. For instance institutions and communes where asylum seekers completed internships started networking on their own initiative because they found the project so important. Partners who were initially sceptical about the benefits of the project became increasingly enthusiastic as progress was made, and actively promoted the DP."

The 27 asylum seekers who participated in the programme had very different cultural as well as educational backgrounds. Most were from crisis regions and came to Germany with very traumatic experiences. The majority were highly educated and had worked as teachers, architects, economists and engineers in their home country before they fled to Germany. Being able to get involved and do something useful helped them regain self-esteem and self-respect.

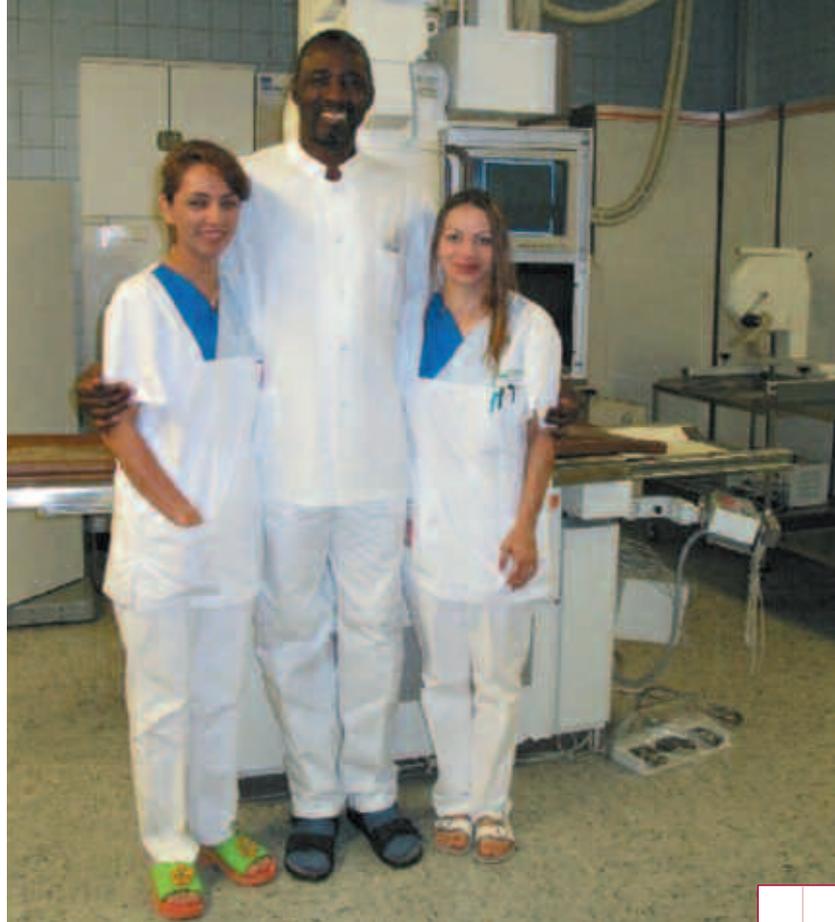
During the on-the-job training, over 60 internships were completed in 18 municipalities throughout the North Rhine-Westphalia region. The responses to job placements were overwhelmingly positive: the cultural and language mediators are now being used in over 140 different social and healthcare organisations, and have so far taken care of more than 1 300 cases. In 50% of cases, concrete job offers have been put on the table.

Results at national and European level

The university clinic of Hamburg Eppendorf has acknowledged and is certifying the job profile and the DP is now concentrating its efforts on obtaining national vocational recognition in the second round of EQUAL.

While the legal situation for asylum seekers in Europe varies from country to country, they all face the common problem of integrating into new societies, often with minimal or no support and guidance. TransSPuk came together with six other EQUAL Development Partnerships to form a transnational partnership called Asycult. Although the partner organisations come from different countries they all share the common goal of developing new education, training and supporting tools to improve asylum seekers' integration into their new society.

A more detailed version and other EQUAL success stories can be found at: http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/equal/activities/search_en.cfm



First day on the job

Country: Germany
Region: North Rhine-Westphalia
Project name: TransSpuk – Transfer von Sprache und Kultur in Gesundheits- und Sozialversorgung
Project duration: January 2002 – June 2005
ESF priority area: Asylum seekers
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National EQUAL partners: BSH mbH, Diakonie Elberfeld, Regionale Arbeitsstellen zur Förderung von Kindern und Jugendlichen aus Zuwander, Rhein-Ruhr-Institut an der Merkator-Universität Duisburg, Stadt Neuss, Verdi
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