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An approach for fast track integration of refugees through employer involvement

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According to Eurostat 44% of young migrants born outside the EU are at risk of being in poverty or socially excluded in 2018.¹ There is thus a need for effective support services to enhance the early integration of legally staying non-EU citizens. The proposed programme developed and tested in the European project RIAC², aims at successful fast track integration of refugees into the labour market. One of the acceleration strategies pursued was the involvement of employers in an integration programme. With the exception of a self-employment programme and a programme for apprenticeships in crafts, the acceleration programmes were geared towards low skilled jobs.³ Basic principles were voluntary participation and self-selection.

The involvement of potential and committed employers ahead of the start of the programme was to accelerate the integration process of refugees into the labour market. Instead of qualifying refugees according to their interests, the process is reversed. The objective is to qualify refugees for available positions. Open positions are presented at the beginning of the process with detailed information, so that potential candidates have a clear understanding of the employer, the place of work, required public transport, earnings and career opportunities. The objective is to attract candidates that are motivated and really interested in the positions. Employers are involved ahead of the start of a RIAC to define their needs, but also to raise awareness on refugee workers. Involving and preparing both sides aims at increasing the chances to produce long-lasting employment relationships.

Ideally a cooperation is established with the local chamber of crafts, chamber of commerce or the local chapter of an industry association. Through these organisations individual employers are contacted and information sessions are organised to find interested parties to engage with a programme with a sector-specific orientation. If this is not possible companies located in the region need to be contacted individually. In Germany, the jobcentre⁴ supported the process as employers register open positions with them. In an information session with interested employers a clear value proposition needs to be offered to make a participation attractive. This could be the integration of specific criteria in the initial candidate selection process, the testing of the suitability of candidates via obligatory internships, the impartation of required knowledge during the training, support in the collection/submission of relevant documents and continued support to the refugees when they start their employment with the participating companies.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Young_people_-_migration_and_socioeconomic_situation.

² <http://riac-project.eu/>

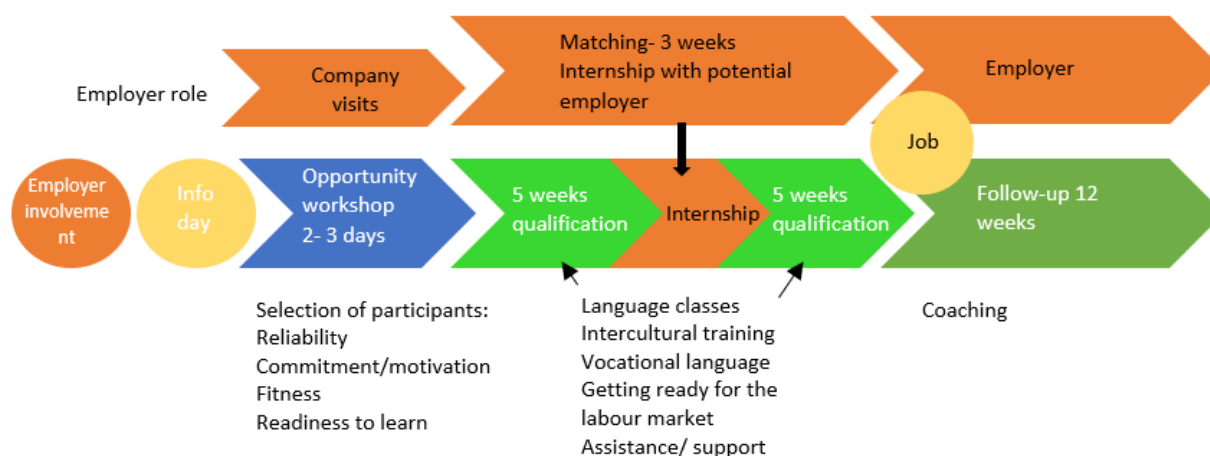
³ Many of the refugees who participated in the German RIAC programme only had a few years of schooling in their countries of origin.

⁴ Local job centres are responsible for anyone who receives basic social security benefits and support recipients in taking up employment.

Jointly with the involved employers' necessary preconditions for specific positions (e.g. language level, mathematical knowledge for a technical position or a basic understanding of crafts) are defined for the assessment process (opportunity workshop). Participants are not required to have already particular skills, work experience or qualifications. The focus is rather on basic knowledge and attitudes such as reliability and the willingness to learn.

Refugees are invited to an information session, where the programme is presented. Interested refugees can register for the "opportunity workshop". It is important to note that this is a voluntary offer to refugees to ensure the attraction only of interested candidates with the aim to increase the probability of success for the refugee and the employer.

The following chart visualises the programme and the employer involvement developed in the framework of the RIAC project.



Source: RIAC project (amended)

The refugees who register, participate in a 2-3 days fulltime opportunity workshop, in the course of which the initial number of participants is decreased in a self-selection/selection process. For example, participants are given a list of German vocabulary and the same words are dictated the next day. The test is therefore not only a language test; participants could study to the vocabulary overnight. An opportunity workshop for truck drivers included an exercise where participants had to find cities on a German map and bring them in a sequence so that the minimum number of kilometres is driven. Participants are also informed about labour rights, minimum wage and income opportunities of professions in question. This approach of confronting participants with the reality and requirements of a job leads to a strong self-selection. All participants who are eliminated not by own choice have a face to face meeting.

Participants who pass the opportunity workshop assessment, continue with a 15 weeks training module which includes an obligatory traineeship with employers. The traineeship should confirm the matching, potentially an alternative could be arranged. However, the successful completion of an internship is a condition to continue the programme. The training module focusses on general and vocational language classes, intercultural training, support to get ready for the labour market as well as assistance with all formalities and obstacles which can slow down the integration process (legal questions, administrative issues, problems with accommodation, family reunification, health, debts, etc.). The focus on language is

important to increase the knowledge level of participants as much as possible to facilitate them passing their written test related to a driver license, entering of a job and the successful participation in the professional school linked to an apprenticeship. Very successful was employers sitting in on training courses; for instance, in a vocational language training course for truck drivers, an employer participated and discussed the process and papers to be completed in case of an accident. This made the exercise very realistic and enabled applied language learning. When participants enter a job, they are accompanied for 12 weeks with weekly meetings, helping if necessary, both, employer and employee to deal with the new situation.

Different approaches regarding the involvement of employers we tested. A temporary employment agency was involved to accelerate integration even further; this turned out to be unworkable as the temporary employment agency complicates the mediation process between employer and employee. A successful follow-up can no longer be guaranteed. The temporary employment agency does not have the time to deal intensively and in detail with employees. The demand for temporary employment is high, so that the agencies focus on new recruits rather than accompanying established relationships; the model only works if special temping agencies focusing on the support and training of refugees such as the Social Bee⁵ in Munich are created.

For a programme for truck drivers no employers were sought. The assumption was made that participants would move on to making their driver licences. With the driving license in hand, the successful participant would easily find a job subject to social insurance contribution as demand in this job market segment surpasses the skilled people available. Five companies were involved at a later stage providing each 1-4 traineeship places for participants. Overall the approach was suboptimal; committed employers need to be involved from the start.

Another issue with the mono-employment oriented programme, such as for truck drivers, was that the number of interested candidates was insufficient after the completion of a single programme while there was still more demand and some limited interest from refugees. A solution could be a “mixed profession programme” which could accommodate smaller numbers of applicants for specific jobs. For instance, three programmes for apprenticeships in various crafts including a baker, plumber, carpenter, auto-repair, mechatronics, etc have been implemented. While this programme did not achieve the same level of acceleration, it turned out to be very popular with refugees, the number of which completing the programme more than doubled between the first and the last programme. Also, the feedback of participating employers and the local chamber of crafts were very positive.

If the labour market integration programme is replicated, certain conditions should be carefully considered:

- Reversing the integration process: instead of starting the integration process from the refugee, it begins with the requirements of employers who have vacancies. Only then jobs can be “guaranteed” to dedicated refugees at the end of the successful qualification process.
- The programme is geared towards rather low skilled jobs or apprenticeships. In the latter successful candidates follow an entire professional education programme with employers and a professional school. The schooling requires a considerable level of the German language. Promising sectors include transport, logistics, retail, construction, horticulture, care and different crafts.

⁵ <https://www.social-bee.de/> (Soziale Arbeitnehmerüberlassung).

- A sufficient number of employers need to be involved for a specific programme. Ideally a chamber of crafts or a sector organisation should be involved to facilitate drawing on a larger number of companies and making the programme repeatable.
 - Many information events and mailings to a very large number of refugees are necessary to ensure a sufficient number of candidates for the opportunity workshop of a programme.
 - Programmes offering a set of different job opportunities (e.g. different crafts) seem to be more attractive and repeatable than programmes addressing only one single job profile.
 - A rigorous selection process (opportunity workshop) is important to ensure that only the most motivated participants remain in the project and are matched with participating employers.
 - Success stories and events praising successful participants and employers are important to extend the community of companies willing to participate.
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