

## THEMATIC PAPER

# **PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT SERVICES (PES) INITIATIVES AROUND SKILLS, COMPETENCIES AND QUALIFICATIONS OF REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS**



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# **PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT SERVICES (PES) INITIATIVES AROUND SKILLS, COMPETENCIES AND QUALIFICATIONS OF REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS**

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In collaboration with ICF



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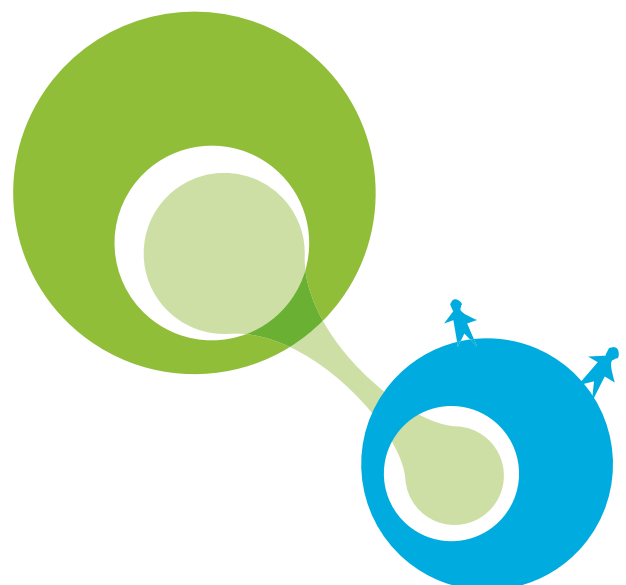
# 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two years, Europe has received an unprecedented number of refugees and asylum seekers. Close to 2.5 million new asylum seekers were registered in the European Union (EU) in 2015 and 2016. Many of them are here to stay and the EU Member States need to ensure that they enter the labour market and become self-reliant as quickly as possible. One of the main challenges for asylum seekers and refugees entering host countries' labour markets concern the recognition of their skills and qualifications. Many of the new arrivals do not possess any documentation of their formal qualifications. In addition, a large proportion of them do not have any formal qualifications but considerable work experience and informally acquired professional skills and competencies. Thus, there is a need to find solutions allowing refugees to have their formal qualifications recognised and (non- and informal) skills and competencies assessed. For Public Employment Services (PES), validation of skills and qualifications is necessary for the planning and provision of services and for building effective relationships with employers.

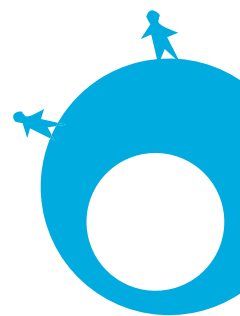
The Thematic Review Workshop under the PES Mutual Learning Programme took place on 27-28 April 2017 in Nuremberg, Germany and was hosted by the German PES (*Bundesagentur für Arbeit (BA)*). The aim of the workshop was to discuss how PES can develop and improve systems to assist asylum seekers and refugees to validate their skills and to utilise them on the labour market. The event brought together PES representatives from Austria, Belgium (VDAB and LE FOREM), Bulgaria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Norway, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden. The present Thematic Paper is based on information provided in the preliminary questionnaire circulated amongst participating PES and presented in the Input Paper (written by Regina Konle-Seidl/ICF in April 2017) in preparation for the event. It is aligned with the focus of the actual workshop content, including key conclusions and final reflections on areas for improvement. This paper is underpinned by both, anecdotal and secondary sources evidencing the good practice presented.

The document is structured as follows:

1. It first describes contextual factors influencing PES service provision, including validation of skills and qualifications for asylum seekers and refugees and discusses the challenges PES are facing in assessing qualifications and validating skills and competencies.
2. It also describes practices to recognise formal qualifications and methods to identify and assess non- and informal skills as well as focusing on newly developed tools by PES in-house or in cooperation with partners.
3. It gives an overview of how results of the validation process are used by PES.
4. Finally, it discusses issues to reflect on, in addition to areas that PES have expressed a desire to develop further.



## 2. CONTEXTUAL FACTORS INFLUENCE PES SERVICE PROVISION FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES



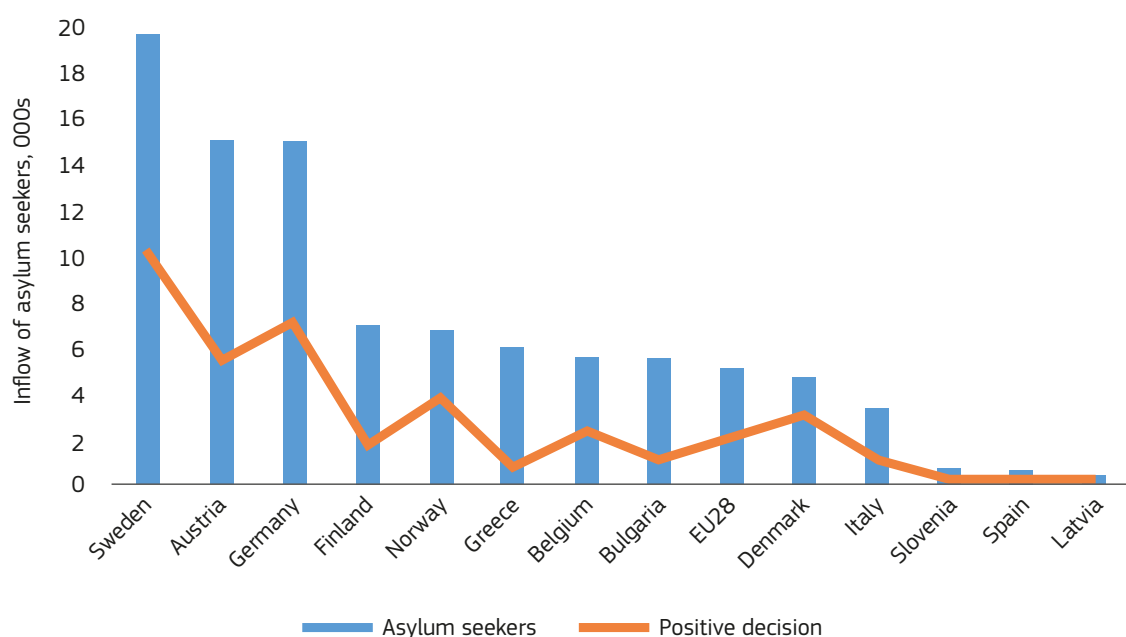
PES operate in very different contexts with very different points of departure in terms of numbers and profiles of refugees, labour market needs, vocational education and training systems (VET), attitudes of the host society and whether countries are transit or settlement countries.

### 2.1 Numbers of asylum seekers and recognition rates

Figure 1 shows that application numbers and recognition rates of asylum seekers vary significantly across countries participating in the Thematic Review Workshop. There are big differences not only in the scope of inflow in 2015 and 2016 but also in the share of asylum applicants granted protection status (first instance decisions), ranging from 63% in Denmark, 55% in Norway, 52% in Sweden, 47% in Germany to 10% in Greece.

Figure 1 also shows that Sweden, Austria and Germany have been the main destination countries for asylum seekers over the past two years. They received the most applications in proportion to their population. The pressure of integrating high numbers of refugees is therefore much higher in these destination countries than in Latvia, Slovenia or Spain which have received comparatively low numbers of asylum applications. While Greece and Italy also have received high numbers of applications the distribution of first instance decisions indicates that they have been mainly transit countries as many asylum seekers tried to get to other destination countries – at least until the EU-Turkey deal. Recent Eurostat data, however, shows that during the first quarter of 2017 Italy was not only the country with the second-highest number of first time asylum applicants (after Germany), but issued also the third-highest first

**Figure 1: Asylum application and recognition rates per 1 000 inhabitants, average for the years 2015 and 2016**



instance decisions<sup>1</sup> in the EU-28 indicating that Italy (as well as Greece) is changing from a transit to a destination country. At the same time, for a high number of applications decisions are still pending. First-arrival countries have the additional challenge of having to care for extremely traumatised and exhausted refugees not ready yet for labour market integration. This additional challenge means that the whole reception system might be overburdened and that these countries need to utilise resources in areas with a more urgent need, thus making it challenging to focus resources elsewhere such as the development of skills validation tools.

## 2.2 Previous integration experiences and current labour market conditions

Considering the growing numbers of applications, there is a need to upscale, adapt and reinvent integration programmes even for countries with well-developed systems. In particular, the Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Norway and Sweden) have long-standing experience and advanced policies in the field of integration. People seeking international protection have comprised a large part of the migration inflows there for many years. Existing multiannual integration programmes have, however, been made more flexible. To speed up integration, the duration of integration programmes are curtailed, e.g. in Denmark from three to two years. More emphasis is now placed on early intervention such as upfront skills assessments, and on speeding up the integration process.

By contrast, for some Central and Eastern European countries the integration of refugees is an entirely new experience. Also the main transit countries in Southern Europe (Greece and Italy) are currently in an initial phase of implementing integration policies. However, integration has only recently been put on the political agenda due to the shift towards

becoming a destination country and political actors have only started building capacity in the integration field<sup>2</sup>.

In contrast, recent major destination countries such as Austria, Belgium, Germany, Finland or Sweden have significantly stepped up their integration efforts, both in scale and scope. Also in other countries much effort has gone into designing appropriate policy responses to facilitate the labour market integration of recently arrived refugees and asylum seekers. In Belgium (Brussels and Wallonia) integration programmes, including language training, have been made compulsory. In the Flemish part of Belgium, as of 2016, candidates require a certificate of civic integration at the end of the integration programme and need to pass a test to demonstrate that they have attained a certain level of Dutch.

Due to the duration of the asylum procedure and participation in early integration activities, those who arrived from 2015/16 are only now starting to enter the labour market. Past experience shows that labour market integration of refugees takes time. On average, in the EU it took between five and six years to integrate (into the workplace) more than 50% of people seeking international protection and as much as 15 years to reach a 70% employment rate converging towards the outcomes for labour migrants (ESDE, 2016). How quickly labour market integration is done

1 Of the 18,910 first instance decisions 44% of applications were granted protection status: 10% refugee status, 10% subsidiary protection and 24% for humanitarian reasons. Internet: [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/images/d/df/First\\_instance\\_decisions\\_by\\_outcome%2C\\_selected\\_Member\\_States%2C\\_1st\\_quarter\\_2017\\_update.PNG](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/images/d/df/First_instance_decisions_by_outcome%2C_selected_Member_States%2C_1st_quarter_2017_update.PNG)

2 Greece is still in a pre-integration phase. Whereas services were focused on asylum seekers originally being in transit, increasingly the focus is on becoming a destination country and therefore political actors such as the municipality of Athens have just started (mid-2017) to work more on integration. A main problem is that actors often lack expertise and experience in the integration field. Italy has made significant changes to its legislation on migration, following EU Directives in this area, but integration policies are still in an initial phase of implementation. Asylum seekers may theoretically sign up to courses after the initial reception phase provided by a first line of reception (offered by centres held by the State or Prefecture) – after registration and the health assessment and with the support of non-profit organizations. By law, in parallel, a second level of reception is increasingly being offered (by centres belonging to the so called SPRAR, the Italian System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees). The SPRAR system is based on municipalities that are responsible for an 'integrated reception'. In this case, integration support is mainly provided by local providers in co-operation with civil society and non-profit organizations.



will be determined mainly by the length of asylum procedures, language promotion, investment in education and training, integration support and the willingness of the companies to hire refugees. Past experience also shows that the overall labour market conditions upon arrival are an important factor for the integration of refugees. From this perspective, the outlook for integration in Germany or Sweden is quite favourable compared to Italy, Spain, Greece or Bulgaria.

In line with these experiences, the European PES Network has identified four key aspects which are of particular importance for the labour market integration of refugees: language, skills and qualifications, partners and institutions, and employers (PES Network, June 2016). Additionally, a key message from the thematic workshop is that the willingness of political actors to step up integration efforts is crucial. Demand for labour and shortages of skilled workers influence the decision on the highest political level to strengthen integration policies ('political will'). Conversely, the lack of jobs dampens such efforts.

## 2.3 National regulatory framework

The aforementioned 'political will' is reflected, for example, in removing or changing legal barriers to accessing the labour market. Governments and social partners have proposed or taken initiatives to facilitate early labour market access for asylum seekers which is deemed to be a key determinant of long-term integration outcomes. EU legislation states that asylum seekers should have access to the labour market no later than nine months after filing their application for international protection, however, this timeframe gives Member States the flexibility to decide about the conditions for granting asylum applicants access to the labour market. Several countries (e.g. Germany, Belgium or Italy) have recently changed their legislation to shorten the waiting time for labour market access. In some countries employers have to prove that no domestic worker could have filled the position in question ('priority review'). In the German case, the 'priority review', which examined whether a job could be occupied by a German or other EU citizen, has been abolished (temporarily) in regions with good labour market conditions. In other countries labour market access is still subject to labour market tests and restrictions for certain sectors. Making labour market access conditional on labour market tests requires authorities to proof, for exam-

ple, that working conditions and payment for the position are in line with local employment conditions. Based on this proof, a work permit is issued. As a result, timing and conditions of effective access to the labour market still vary across countries (see Figure A1 in the Annex for an overview).

## 2.4 Refugee management

In practice, there are significant challenges for countries in providing services to asylum seekers before a decision on their application is taken, particularly when it comes to resources. Early intervention can be costly and may mean diverting support to asylum seekers before residence permits are granted. That is why some countries have set up preferential rules in order to manage high numbers of asylum applications and long processing times more effectively. PES services may also learn from these approaches to alleviate potential resourcing challenges and deliver services more effectively.

Access to integration measures at an early stage for asylum seekers with good prospects to remain in the host country is a measure adopted by an increasing number of EU countries. The idea behind such measures is to use the time period during the asylum procedure for language training, skills assessments and labour market preparation in order to shorten the time it takes to enter employment and become self-sufficient.

In Belgium, asylum seekers who do not receive a first instance decision on their asylum application within four months can access a temporary work permit card (type C work permit). The card enables asylum seekers to work for any employer as long as they fulfil certain skills requirements. In Finland, a quick identification of professional skills of asylum seekers in reception centres while awaiting asylum decisions is taken into consideration when choosing a settlement area that offers education and business opportunities to match the skills<sup>3</sup>. In Germany, since November 2015 asylum seekers from countries with high prospects of being allowed to stay – such as from Syria or Iraq with recognition rates above 50% – as well

<sup>3</sup> Internet: <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/news/finland-action-plan-on-integration-taking-into-account-increasing-immigration-flows>

as ‘tolerated’<sup>4</sup> persons have gained a ‘priority treatment’ regarding the access to an integration course and advanced job-related language training as well as to PES job placement services. Norway has set up special ‘integration reception centres’, in which asylum seekers whose claims for asylum are likely to be accepted, participate in a full-time qualification programme that includes language training and a 50-hour orientation course to the Norwegian culture and society.

## 2.5 Skills and qualifications of newly arrived asylum seekers

Education, qualifications and skills are key to the labour market integration of refugees. Representative (administrative or survey) data on the educational background and the potential for skill acquisition are, however, rare and available only in a few countries. Precise and early registration of personal data and asylum seekers’ qualifications as well as the general availability of such data for all public entities to facilitate inclusion into the labour market is scarce. Some Scandinavian countries (Norway and Sweden) have more systematic statistics on qualification levels or even longitudinal administrative databases (e.g. STATIV in Sweden) providing information about all residents in Sweden including refugees. Administrative data in other countries usually do not differentiate between the reasons for immigration of foreign-born. The German PES has only recently (June 2016) made efforts to statistically record refugees (differentiating between asylum seekers, recognised refugees and tolerated persons) in its statistics on jobseekers and unemployed<sup>5</sup>. Also

only a few European countries run representative surveys on migration and integration, a major reason for the scarce empirical research done on the labour market integration of refugees in the past. A new German survey (IAB-BAMF-SOEP) of 4 500 recently arrived refugees to Germany has generated an entirely new database for analysing forced migration and the integration of refugees into the German labour market and society. Such a comprehensive and representative panel survey is, however, an exception in Europe.

## 2.6 Attitudes of employers

The commitment and active engagement of employers as partners of PES is particularly important as labour market integration can only be successful when employers are willing to hire refugees. Many employers do not see an immediate business case for hiring refugees or asylum seekers. Surveys show that employers who hire asylum seekers or refugees have a high CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) commitment, particularly larger employers. Almost 80% of the employers who participated, for example, in a recent German survey<sup>6</sup> and hired asylum seekers or refugees did so at least in part because of social responsibility, while only 45% mentioned current or future labour shortages. About one third (34%) who hired asylum seekers or refugees did so through the involvement of the PES (OECD, 2017).

While employers in Germany or Sweden, for example, are generally willing to employ refugees, participants in the workshop highlighted that employers in other countries are more hesitant. Although there is no empirical evidence – from for example comparable employer surveys in different countries – to back up this anecdotal evidence it is reasonable to assume that public attitudes to im-

4 Asylum seekers often occupy an ambiguous legal status if their applications are rejected. Many rejected asylum-seekers can, however, not be returned due to the principle of *non-refoulement*. Many host countries leave these individuals with an undefined status (which often leads to undocumented residency). Germany’s legal framework is unusual in that it makes specific provisions for these people, as the country legally recognises them as ‘tolerated persons’. This covers mostly unsuccessful asylum seekers who do not voluntarily return and whose deportation is suspended for factual, legal or political reasons.

5 See the monthly report ‘Migrationsmonitor Arbeitsmarkt’ (migration monitor labour market) by <http://statistik.arbeitsagentur.de/Navigation/Statistik/Statistische-Analysen/Statistische-nderberichte/Migration-Arbeitsmarkt/Migration-Arbeitsmarkt-Nav.html>

6 The OECD – DIHK (Association of German Chambers of Commerce and Industry) – BAMS (Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs) survey was conducted online between January 16 and February 7, 2017. The interactive survey was disseminated via the local chambers of commerce, and about 2000 employers participated in the survey via this channel. In addition, the survey was also disseminated via the DIHK network ‘Companies Integrate Refugees’ (*Netzwerk Unternehmen integrieren Flüchtlinge*), where a further 200 employers responded.

migration also influence employers. The political sensitivity around refugee and migration issues in many countries makes CSR projects targeted at refugees more difficult given the risk of politicising the workplace. This argument can limit the buy-in from companies, particularly, in small and medium sized companies (UNHCR and OECD, 2016). Results from the ESS (European Social Survey) show indeed considerable differences concerning anti-immigration preference (where respondents would like to see few or no immigrants admitted in the country) across EU countries. Anti-immigration preferences varied from less than 10% in Sweden and less than a quarter in Germany but to over 50% in Austria and Finland and to nearly three quarters in Hungary (Hatton, 2017).

Ways to engage employers more actively include addressing labour demand in certain sectors such as fast-tracks in Norway and Sweden, and the provision of financial incentives (e.g. wage subsidies, training bonuses, compensation for skills assessment in the workplace) and non-monetary incentives. Marketing campaigns and business partnerships ('ambassador companies') as initiated, for example, by the government in Denmark ('United for better Integration') are promising ways to encourage employers to take an active part and therefore contribute to successful integration by creating jobs for refugees.

In the spring of 2016, another innovative approach was launched by the Finnish Ministry of Employment and Economy in cooperation with the Finnish Innovation Fund to engage employers in refugee integration. So-called Social Impact Bonds (SBI) allow private investors to finance measures to improve the integration of refugees. The effectiveness of these bonds will be tested in a three year pilot initiative<sup>7</sup>.

Direct contact between PES and employers is important to manage employers' expectations and know their skills needs in order to sustain the employment of refugees. PES with dedicated employer relationship staff such as the Austrian or the German PES (AMS and BA respectively) have an advantage in this respect as they follow a proactive approach maintaining strong contacts with employers.

## 2.7 National VET systems

During the discussions at the thematic workshop it also became apparent that national VET systems have a clear impact on the process of recognising vocational qualifications and validating (in- and non-formal) skills. Recognition models and procedures are structured very differently. They vary not only depending on whether the focus is on a 'regulated profession' or 'non-regulated occupation' but also depend on the structure of the host labour market. In largely non-occupationally structured labour markets, as it is the case, for instance, in the UK, relevant recognition procedures for non-regulated occupations are widely obsolete. Within labour markets structured by occupations and characterised by collective bargaining agreements, which is the case in many other European countries, recognition is more important. Country differences in occupationally structured labour markets emerge from the understanding of what is meant by 'vocational' education and training. In Austria and Germany, for example, vocational education and training is inseparably connected to the dual apprenticeship system and to a nationwide uniform qualification pathway which is steered by the social partners and closely linked to the labour market. The so called 'recognised occupation requiring formal training' acquired within the dual system belongs, in the main, to the non-regulated occupations. The recognition of formal qualifications is, thus, in both countries perceived more as a measure to protect and safeguard recognised occupational standards. In contrast, the Danish approach, for example, focuses on 'fundamental comparability' of qualifications considering that learning outcomes can be achieved via different routes which makes the assessment of qualifications acquired abroad easier.

Consequently, the underlying principles and pathways via which recognition and validation takes place differ considerably across the participating countries. The principles can be contoured by the question whether the approaches/regulations are directed towards the verification of a full equivalence to the reference qualification/occupation or whether a more 'basic comparability' shall be confirmed (Eberhardt/Annen, 2014). While 'equivalence checks' test whether professional qualifications obtained abroad are equivalent to the respective reference occupation, 'low-threshold competence assessment' procedures are also aligned towards the identification of informal and

7 See Nordic Labour Journal, 7. December 2015. Internet: <http://www.nordiclabourjournal.org/nyheter/news-2015/article.2015-12-07.3565624712>

non-formal<sup>8</sup> competencies. In the Scandinavian countries the latter dominates. That is probably the reason why the handling time of recognition applications are shorter. It is also the reason why most Scandinavian countries are more 'advanced' in the validation of informal and non-formal skills and competencies. Denmark, Finland and Norway (but not Sweden) have national legally binding standards in place whereas Austria, Germany and most other countries have no uniform framework in validating informal and non-formal skills (see Table 1 in the Annex for an overview).

Austria and Germany are rather 'developing countries' in this regard. In both countries, it is hardly possible to recognise prior learning without having any certificates or proof of working experience. Hence, there are currently only very limited ways to use non-formal/informally acquired competencies for those without formal training due to fears that the standards for long established skilled crafts will be lowered.

## 2.8 Governance of the labour market integration process

The labour market integration of refugees and asylum seekers requires:

- Systematic and effective cooperation between relevant actors;
- A clear division of roles, shared objectives and expected outcomes; and
- Agreements on data sharing and/or one-point reception centres to close coordination gaps.

The path into employment is, like social integration, a multifaceted process which goes through different phases over time and involves a variety of actors at different levels. Labour market integration is, thus, a cross-cutting policy issue that includes a large number of stakeholders. Therefore,

systematic and effective cooperation between relevant actors (migration offices, municipalities, the VET system, NGOs, PES, social partners) is essential to address labour market integration issues effectively. There are however still many coordination gaps even in countries, in particular in those countries with little targeted services to refugees and asylum seekers.

Streamlining refugee integration in the sense of having one public body coordinating integration policies and measures in all relevant portfolios and levels of government and public services is an important step to avoid cooperation gaps. Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden have recently made efforts to mainstream their integration policy. Whereas in Sweden the PES is given a central role in coordinating the integration path for refugees, the central coordination role in the other Scandinavian countries is relegated to municipalities. In most other EU countries there is a higher degree of fragmentation hindering transparency and often leading to undesirable cooperation gaps.

The introduction of an ID card specifically for asylum seekers which becomes obligatory from the moment of first registration might be one way to streamline efforts. Such an ID card should be linked to a central database to which all authorities and service providers have access, providing information about personal characteristics including health, educational background and professional experience.

In addition, a lack of communication between migration agencies and the PES often leads to inefficiencies. This is also the case in mapping refugees' skills. In Sweden, for example, the PES often starts the background mapping of past education and experiences from the beginning rather than building upon the previous work of the Migration Board. Municipalities then often repeat the mapping exercise for a third time before allocating migrants to language classes. To avoid such double or triple work it is important that language training, preparatory integration measures or skills mapping started in reception facilities are documented and communicated between actors.

The way in which referrals and data flows between different stakeholders are carried out are thus of high importance. Some PES have started working with public authorities responsible for the registration process in order to facilitate data sharing and the provision of information on courses. A recent

<sup>8</sup> *Informal skills* are opposite to the formal learning experience. They result from daily activities related to work, family or leisure; they are not organised or structured. *Non-formal learning* is embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning. Non-formal skills and competencies are a by-product of other learning activities which are intentional from the learner's point of view. *Example:* a car mechanics course in the workplace (formal learning), in which the students also learn something about teamwork or problem solving.

agreement in Finland between the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment and the Finnish Immigration Service (MIGRI) on data transferring is deemed to help close coordination gaps.

Another way of providing a more effective sequencing of support is setting up one-stop-shops combining different services under one roof. Some cities in Belgium (Flanders) and Germany have recently set-up one-point reception centres to coordinate the efforts of local welfare agencies, agencies for civic integration, PES and other local actors.

## 2.9 The PES mandate in the integration process differs across countries

Depending on the national regulatory context, PES play different roles in the labour market integration process and come in at different stages which impacts differently on PES services and resources. The mandate of the Swedish PES, for example, is more far reaching than in most other countries as the Swedish *Arbetsförmedlingen* has a major responsibility for the implementation of the Introduction Act. Once a permanent or temporary protection status is assigned the Swedish PES draws up an individually tailored two-year integration plan with full-time participation and individual career plan covering e.g. language and civic tuition and measures that prepare for further training, education or work<sup>9</sup>. The PES mandate in Denmark and Norway (where similar multiannual introduction programmes exist) is less comprehensive and PES get involved at a later stage. The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Service (NAV) checks, for example, whether some of the labour market measures can be used or adapted into the introduction programme and assesses the need for assistance

in the final stage of the programme. In most other countries the PES is usually responsible for the job matching and skills development of refugees who have already been granted protection status and who are registered with the PES. In Italy, the recently established PES, ANPAL (National Agency for Active Labour Market Policies), has not yet been involved in the integration process but will probably get more engaged in integration measures in the future, especially in the skills validation and qualification recognition processes (EU-Commission, 2016).

### 2.9.1 PES provide services for refugees differently

The survey among PES participating in the thematic workshop shows that there are quite important differences in service provision. Individual country approaches range from:

- Mainstreaming refugees (and sometimes asylum seekers) into general labour market support measures targeted at other immigrants or at the general population of jobseekers;
- Some targeting to meet the specific needs of asylum seekers and refugees, for example in individual projects or programmes; and
- Targeted services.

No distinction in the delivery of PES services is made between refugees or jobseekers in Greece, Italy and Slovenia, so services are mainstreamed across client groups of PES. This lack of targeted services is probably due to the scarce resources and a very tight national labour market.

Most participating countries however follow a mixed approach – combining measures that do not distinguish between refugees and other jobseekers with targeted projects/programmes. The extent of specific labour market integration support measures varies, however, across countries and ranges from additional information services, skills mapping and counselling services in reception centres (e.g. in Bulgaria or Latvia) to more intensive and carefully designed programs (e.g. in Austria, Germany, Norway or Sweden).

In Bulgaria, the PES informs recognised refugees in reception centres about PES mediation services via a multilingual information brochure and documents educational and qualification profiles to facilitate the quick delivery of mediation services after having

<sup>9</sup> The so-called Establishment reform (December 2010) transferred the responsibility for the integration of newly-arrived refugees from the municipalities to the central government, that is, the PES. The reform was motivated by concerns over the low employment level and slow integration of refugees (Anderson Joona et al., 2016). As the PES was overwhelmed with such a central coordinating role, new legislation, in force from 1 March 2016, has strengthened the role of the municipalities. Under the new law municipalities are obliged to settle migrants granted asylum, replacing a system under which municipalities participated in reception on a voluntary basis only.





registered at the labour office. In Latvia the number of refugees registered with the Latvian PES is rather small, so service provision consists of a more personalised approach which allows refugees to look for possible work places (and living places next to them) from an early stage. For this purpose, PES counselors go out to reception centres to inform and advice asylum seekers individually on their job opportunities in Latvia and the labour market of Latvia in general. The Latvian PES additionally provides lectures for asylum seekers about the Latvian labour market and the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs provides language courses (on behalf of the state).

The Austrian PES has developed differentiated 'Competence Checks' targeted at refugee women, young and older male refugees. In Belgium, the Flemish VDAB has developed an 'Integration through Work' programme where 'foreign language jobseekers with a migration background' (incl. refugees and asylum seekers) are allocated to one of four integration pathways after a 'distance to the labour market' assessment<sup>10</sup>. The German PES provides targeted short-term programmes such as 'Perspectives for Refugees' (PerF) or 'KompAS', schemes that include vocational language training, site visits to companies, skills assessment and counselling for asylum seekers and refugees. Fast-track approaches in Norway and Sweden are targeted towards highly qualified refugees and refugees with skills and qualifications in sectors with high workforce demand.

Very targeted services exist in Scandinavian countries with 'Integration Programmes', lasting between one and two years, and other measures, for example, the Danish two year training programme (IGU) targeted specifically at refugees.

The discussions in the thematic workshop made clear that not everybody needs targeted services. It makes sense instead to address individual barriers to entering the labour market rather than providing standardised services for all refugees. Individualised

services also remain essential within the four pathways provided in the 'Integration through work' programme of the Flemish PES (VDAB).

The integrated but often standardised 'Integration Programmes' in the Scandinavian countries have been criticised in the past as having considerable 'lock-in' effects and for not being flexible enough. While two years is not sufficient for low-skilled refugees to learn the language and acquire a professional qualification, for highly qualified persons two years is often too long. These criticisms have prompted major legal changes<sup>11</sup>.

A targeted approach might make sense for a limited time and type of services such as early skills assessment and for certain groups, e.g. highly qualified people. A key finding of the workshop was that a targeted approach needs commitment and active engagement of all relevant actors for it to work, especially employers. Moreover, tailored services are important also in targeted approaches.

Another issue raised in the workshop concerned the use of the label 'refugee' which could be sometimes avoided in order to prevent unnecessary measures and to provide more individual support (i.e. not everyone needs a language course or, highly qualified refugees might not need training but access to qualification recognition). Moreover, there might be more public resistance if special services and costly programmes are only provided to refugees and not to other vulnerable groups. Thus, it is important that targeted support measures for migrants/refugees might open up new possibilities for other vulnerable groups. Measures such as combining skills validation tools with training needs could also be a valuable instrument for unemployed nationals and other migrants without formal qualifications. Identifying the scope of utilising refugee specific services for other groups facing employment barriers might therefore help legitimising the use of resources for refugee specific measures.

10 After a customised screening, refugees and asylum seekers (with a card C work permit) are streamed into one of the four pathways: 1) quick mediation, 2) integrated pathway, 3) combined pathway and 4) linear pathway depending on the availability of professional competencies and the degree of Dutch language knowledge. The knowledge of Dutch is considered as a competency but not as a prerequisite, especially in pathway one and two (VDAB, 2017).

11 The Danish government has made a series of amendments to its Integration Act in 2016. New arrivals are now generally considered 'job-ready' and expected to participate in job training unless considered ineligible due to health or other issues. For migrants whose skills are not yet sufficient to enter the labour market, a two-year basic education scheme (IGU) was introduced which combines classroom education with a remunerated internship. In Norway, the Introduction Act was amended to better align job-related training schemes with individual integration plans (OECD, 2017b).

### 2.9.2 Timing of support delivered by PES

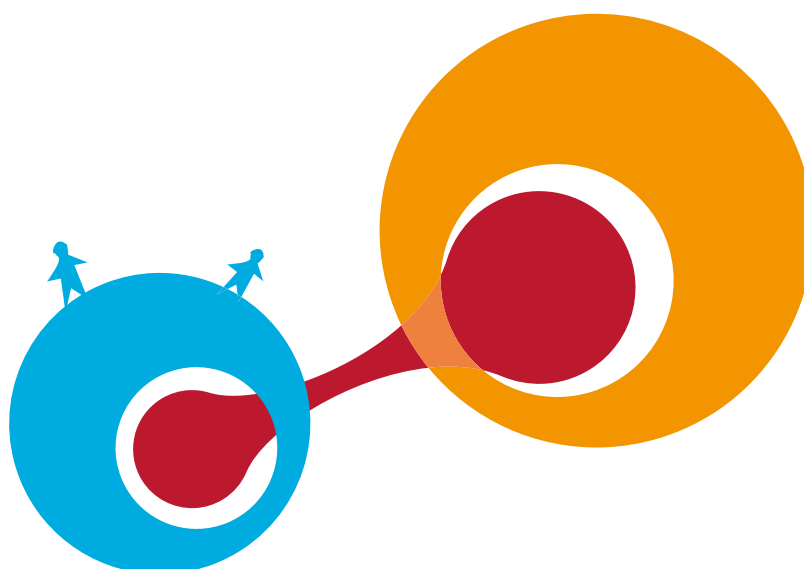
The timing of support delivered by PES is important in the light of past experience and confirmed by evidence from research that early intervention is critical to the success of integration policies in the longer term (OECD, 2016a, Konle-Seidl/Boltis, 2016). However, before objectives such as language learning and entry into employment are addressed, other refugee-specific barriers such as healthcare need to be treated. Findings from surveys confirm that health issues can be a fundamental obstacle to integration as they affect virtually all areas of life and shape the ability to enter employment, learn the host country's languages or interact with public institutions (Cebulla et al. 2010).

Early intervention, however, is especially desirable when asylum procedures are long, as inactivity has a clear de-motivating effect for many new arrivals keen to start learning and working. Offering support services such as training at an early stage might also prevent the 'blunting' of individuals' existing professional skills, but must be balanced against the state of their well-being, particularly the desire to earn money very quickly in order to support their family at home or for family reunification. As asylum seekers are usually not registered with the PES they are not entitled to specific ALMP measures early on. However, PES increasingly offer services to asylum seekers even before they obtain protection status.

The German PES already provides support at an early stage. The objective is to prepare some asylum seekers for the labour market and integrate those able to work into language courses, training and work. In line with recent legal changes, asylum seekers from countries with high prospects of being allowed to stay as well as 'tolerated' people have access to general labour market measures although waiting periods differ by measure.

As early support is a major integration driver more and more countries such as Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden are ensuring early access to dedicated integration measures such as skills assessment.

In Belgium asylum seekers with a type C work permit have recently got access to an array of measures provided by the Flemish PES (VDAB) including subsidies and training, without losing valuable time during the asylum reception. In Finland, the National Board of Education in cooperation with the Ministry of Employment and the Economy organises language training and other integrative training for asylum seekers living in reception centres while waiting for relocation to a municipality. A modularised integration training with three different pathways, adapted to whether the individual is a fast or slow learner also aims to inform the Finnish PES offices in validating the qualifications of asylum seekers, and to make integration training more job-orientated (EEPO, June 2016). In Sweden a scheme mapping the professional skills of refugees still residing at a Migration Board facility was introduced in 2016.



### 3. METHODS TO IDENTIFY AND ASSESS SKILLS AND QUALIFICATIONS

Beyond gaining skills in the host country's language, the qualification a refugee holds is perhaps the most critical component in determining his/her integration path and the necessary upskilling. Validation that is undertaken early on is therefore fundamental. The mapping (identification) of skills and competencies constitutes the first step of a skills validation procedure and is often carried out early on in reception centres. It explores if the

asylum seeker or refugee has formal qualifications and if they can be documented. In this section practices to recognise formal qualifications and methods to identify and assess skills are described. The focus is on newly developed tools by PES in-house or in cooperation with partners.



#### EU efforts on qualification recognition and skills validation

European rules on mutual recognition of qualifications were introduced in 2005. The 'Professional Qualifications Directive (Directive 2005/36/EC)' applies to EU citizens and to third country nationals (incl. refugees) only if the holder of the certificate has three years' professional experience in the profession on the territory of the Member State. Member States proceed on a case-by-case basis and have a fair bit of discretion in terms of granting access to a given profession. For a limited number of professions (doctors, dentists, nurses, midwives, pharmacists, veterinary surgeons, and architects) the Directive allows for automatic recognition of qualifications. The Directive was modernised in 2013 (2013/55/EU) responding to the need to have a smoother recognition system supporting the mobility of professionals across Europe.

In December 2012, the Council of the EU adopted a 'Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning'. The Recommendation calls for Member States to put in place, no later than 2018, arrangements to enable individuals to have their knowledge, skills and competences acquired via non-formal and informal learning validated, and to be able to obtain a full qualification, or, where applicable, part qualification on the basis of validated non-formal and informal learning experiences. In this vein the 'New Skills Agenda for Europe' –

launched by the European Commission in 2016 – aims to make better use of the skills that are available and equip people with the new skills that are needed to help them find quality jobs and improve their life chances. Under the Skills Agenda, the proposed 'Upskilling pathways for low skilled adults' promotes opportunities for validation of non-formal and informal skills.

To further support early identification and profiling of skills and qualifications of asylum seekers, refugees and other migrants, the EU-Commission has been developing a 'Skills Profile Tool Kit for Third Country Nationals'. The Skills Profile Tool was presented only recently (20 June 2017). The online tool aims to map qualifications and experiences of refugees and other third country nationals who can therefore create profiles with personal details such as country of origin and residence status, as well as professional information like educational level and past experiences. They can also add their aspirations for the future: from improving their language skills to finding a job in a field of their choice.

The online self-assessment tool is designed to propose 'next steps' on the basis of provided information. It can be used by recruiters in interview situations and integration, particularly PES, as it is designed in a way that is well understood by those actors across the whole European Union. Collected data will also be used for statistical purposes. <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223&intPageld=5019&langId=en>



Basically, two broad kinds of assessment procedures can be distinguished:

- The formal recognition of qualifications for asylum seekers and refugees with foreign vocational or tertiary degrees; and
- The recognition of prior learning by validating informal and non-formal skills and competencies for those with professional skills acquired chiefly through work experience or informal learning but not underpinned by formal credentials.

Not only Member States but also the EU has made a lot of efforts on skills validation to make non-formal and informal learning visible socially, in the labour market or in the education system through its identification, documentation, assessment and certification. The different stages of this process are explained in the box on p. 16.

### 3.1 Importance of assessing skills and qualifications

For PES, not only recognition but also the validation of prior work experience is of particular importance to help match refugees effectively with employment opportunities and build effective relations with employers. It is equally important to make acquired skills and competencies not only visible but also usable for job entry and further training.

Not adequately reflecting and recognising skills and qualifications puts refugees at risk of being incorrectly classified as 'unskilled', which in turn may hinder their career progression or even labour market integration. According to results from the 2014 EU Labour Force Survey ad hoc module, refugees are much more likely to be overqualified than other migrants. In total, a full 60% of employed tertiary-educated refugees in the EU are overqualified for the jobs they occupy, more than twice the level of the native-born and also well above the levels for other migrant groups (EU-OECD, 2016).

As long as certified professional qualifications exist, their recognition is crucial for a better use of refugees' skills. This is probably mainly the case for those that are highly qualified, representing rather a minority of the refugees. Recognition processes of formal vocational credentials have two primary functions. Firstly, if the outcome is successful they ensure that migrants/refugees meet the requirements for certain occupations. Secondly, they allow

employers to assess the vocational skills and experience of potential employees with qualifications acquired abroad.

### 3.2 The recognition of formal qualifications

The recognition of formal qualifications in regulated and non-regulated professions in the host country serves the purpose of formalising occupational skills and competences that someone has acquired in another country and which can be demonstrated by qualifications and certificates referenced to the host country's existing occupational standards or the labour market.

Applications for assessment of foreign qualifications have to be made by the holders themselves but can also be forwarded by employers, and in Denmark also by the unemployment insurance. In all countries, recognition in regulated occupations (e.g. doctors, nurses, lawyers or engineers) is a prerequisite to accessing the profession as well as to using the job title. About 740 categories of regulated professions exist across the 28 Member States. A regulated profession implies that access to a profession is subject to a person holding a specific qualification, such as a diploma from a university. Regulated occupations are subject to the 'European Professional Qualifications Directive' (see box on p. 16) that is implemented into national law and is thus recognised *de jure* in all EU countries. Each Member State can, however, decide autonomously on whether an occupation is regulated or not.

For the non-regulated occupations, recognition is not an entry requirement to the labour market but is seen as an option to provide employers and companies with a better understanding of the foreign qualification. Few countries (e. g. Denmark, Finland, Germany and still pending in Austria) have laws in place that give the holders of non-regulated professions the right to recognition or assessment. In Belgium, special procedures for asylum seekers and refugees have been put in place to deal with incomplete documentation and to allow for validation of relevant competences free of charge. For refugees with formal degrees who are not able to document them, the German Recognition Act also provides the possibility to use 'other procedures' in a so-called 'qualification analysis'. Such procedures can be trial work in a company, specialist discussions, role plays,



simulated conversation, and/or the presentation of work results. A similar qualification analysis (work test) for those lacking proof of their qualification exists in Finland. In Austria, such a procedure is currently developed under the auspices of the new Recognition Act. The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) is currently piloting how to evaluate the formal education of persons who claim to have higher education.

### 3.2.1 Positive effects of qualification recognition

The gains from recognition might vary across countries. They might be higher in countries with a highly regulated VET system like Germany or Austria where the lack of formal certificates restricts the access to many occupations. Empirical evidence from the German IAB-SOEP migration panel shows that immigrants (including refugees) with foreign degrees being recognised as equivalent to home country degrees improve their employment rate by 23 percentage points, reduce job-skills mismatch by 32 percentage points and increase their wages by 28% compared to those immigrants (incl. refugees) who did not ask for recognition (Brücker et al. 2014).

These results are widely confirmed by a recently published evaluation of the 'Recognition Act'<sup>12</sup> (introduced in 2012) giving migrants and third country nationals the right to get foreign qualifications recognised in regulated as well as in non-regulated professions. The study of the effects of the 'Recognition Act' commissioned by the German Parliament shows that third-country nationals with qualifications acquired abroad as well as persons with a vocational qualification in a non-regulated

profession profit the most from the recognition law. The labour market integration of the applicants improved significantly after the recognition process. For applicants whose employment rate increased by about 30 percentage points, they were more frequently employed in full-time jobs (+ 11.5 percentage points) and were employed in jobs more adequately fitting their qualifications. This is reflected by an increase in wages by 26 percentage points after recognition compared to the date of their application. However, recognition works better in some professions and not so good in others – 60% are concentrated on doctors and nurses and applications for non-regulated professions remain quite low (Deutscher Bundestag, 2017).

### 3.2.2 Challenges and initiatives to improve the recognition process

Countries differ considerably with respect to both existing standards for the recognition of formal qualifications – particularly in non-regulated occupations – and the degree of coordination for the recognition of foreign credentials.

Common challenges in recognising foreign qualifications concern:

- Cooperation with multiple actors;
- Counselling on qualification recognition;
- Processing time of applications for recognition;
- Implementation of up-skilling measures to gain full recognition; and
- Networking between PES and health care support services to take care of vulnerability.

Although most PES have, foremost, a counselling part in the recognition process, the cooperation with multiple actors is a challenge for PES in itself, especially if no comprehensive and accessible infrastructure is in place. Responsibilities in assessing foreign degrees and qualifications are usually divided among a variety of actors (qualification authorities, employers, trade unions, chambers of industry, commerce and skilled crafts, education and training providers, and services in charge of migrants' integration) and the process is often complex.

### Good practices on inter-agency collaboration

Hence, for most countries the question of how to develop an accessible infrastructure through inter-agency collaboration is crucial. In this regard existing institutional structures and legislative

12 The German law 'to improve the assessment and recognition of professional and vocational education and training qualifications acquired abroad' (Recognition Act) in force since 2012 covers only occupations that are governed by Federal law. These encompass 84 regulated occupations (including the craft trades where a licence and possession of a master craftsman qualification is required in order to operate a company) and 519 non-regulated occupations (i.e. the 330 dual training occupations and 180 advanced training occupations that are governed by the Vocational Training Act and the Crafts and Trades Regulation Code). For the first time, the 'Recognition Act' provides skilled workers in non-regulated occupations with an opportunity to have their qualification assessed and thereby improve their chances on the labour market.

frameworks can be an important consideration. Good practice examples from Austria, Belgium (Wallonia), Denmark, Finland and Germany might provide valuable suggestions for other countries to improve inter-agency collaboration.

Since 2003 the Austrian PES can refer third country nationals to free, multilingual personal counselling concerning the possibility of formally recognising their qualifications, as part of the 'Contact Points for Persons with Qualifications from Foreign Countries' initiative. The PES counsellors can also offer support during the process. A good example of inter-agency collaboration is the Belgian (Wallonia) 'Competence Validation Consortium' (CVDC). The Walloon PES (LE FOREM) is one out of five public institutions involved in the consortium which organises the recognition process in cooperation with accredited validation centers. In Denmark, coordination is facilitated by the fact that a single agency is commissioned with the task of conducting recognition procedures. The 'Danish Agency for University and Internationalisation' (DAUI) is the central institution responsible for the assessment of foreign nationals' credentials, including applications for regulated professions. The decision on the permission to practice the profession (authorisation) remains, however, with the competent public authority in the specific field.

Sweden has a decentralised validation system with many actors involved. To develop more effective validation methods for more sectors and occupations than in the fast tracks, a 'National Delegation for Validation' (2015-19) has been set up to follow, support and encourage coordinated work to develop validation. Extra funding has been provided to the PES to identify needs of complementary training and more effective bridging courses. Two pilot schemes have been set up: one offering validation to immigrants lacking full documentation of previous studies and a second one offering 'validation vouchers' to incentivise employers to use existing validation procedures (Berg, 2016).

#### **Good practices concerning counselling on qualification recognition**

The German IQ-Network is not only a good practice example for inter-agency collaboration for the recognition of professional qualifications obtained abroad but also for counselling on qualification recognition. The IQ-Network was established in the framework of the 'Recognition Act'. It provides solid and consistent coordination mechanisms

between stakeholders at various levels of government including PES agencies and jobcentres. The IQ-Network offers support with access to information, vocational direction, recognition of qualifications in regulated and non-regulated professions, develops upskilling measures (e.g. bridging courses to gain full recognition) and provides inter-cultural training measures for relevant actors, including PES staff. This allows for a flexible approach, as stakeholders can determine the necessary services for different users (Eurofound, 2015). To support small and medium sized companies in hiring refugees, a mentoring programme, 'Welcome guides – matching skills and job placement for refugees', was introduced in 2015. The recent setup of the multilingual information portal, 'Recognition in Germany', provides further possibilities for migrants/refugees to carry out their own research and gain an initial overview of the topic for themselves.

#### **Setting standards for the length of the recognition application's procedure**

In many countries procedures are rigorous and long-lasting, which is one reason for low application rates made by migrants/refugees. Handling times vary between two to five days (Denmark) over several months (Germany, Sweden) and up to one year (Slovenia). Reasons for these considerable differences include the complicated procedures for regulated professions, and bureaucratic requirements, especially the lack of clear strategies on streamlining and regulating the recognition processes in countries with high numbers of regulated professions (e.g. Slovenia). Processing time, however, also depends on the underlying assessment principles (see the chapter on VET systems above). In Denmark, where training-related final qualifications ('learning outcomes') are assessed, several applications can be handled per day. Moreover, to assist accommodation centres with skill assessments, the DAUI has set up a hotline to advise on foreign qualifications recognition (OECD, 2017b). In comparison to this, the German equivalence assessment is much more time consuming. To shorten the handling time Germany and Sweden have introduced standards, i.e. a maximum processing time of three months.

#### **Upskilling measures/bridging courses to gain full recognition**

Refugees whose foreign credentials are not equivalent to domestic qualifications need to acquire the missing skills that will help them achieve full equivalence. Most PES provide some support to get

qualifications recognised<sup>13</sup> but only few PES offer 'bridging programmes' to fully recognise a qualification. In this context, bridging courses have to be distinguished from complementary education and training which are usually mainstreamed into existing programmes of adult education and active labour market programmes (ALMPs).

In their fast track approach the Belgian PES (VDAB) provides a combination of language and job training in the work place. Newcomers who have previously acquired skills in shortage occupations can learn the necessary professional Dutch language on the work floor. Language instructors commissioned by VDAB visit the work place and teach/coach both migrants/refugees as well as Dutch speaking colleagues. The language instructors focus on the specific elements of the Dutch language that is needed in the company in order to ensure that the foreign jobseeker can get along independently.

The German IQ Network offers around 140 projects that include upskilling measures where counselling or the recognition procedure has shown that qualifications are insufficient. Such upskilling measures can include both professional training as well as language tuition and most of them are currently provided for healthcare professionals. To increase the number of such quality-assured 'qualification analyses' the IQ-Network in cooperation with the PES has been commissioned to design pilot projects to support the 'qualification analysis' through decentralised training sessions, individual consultations, work tools, knowledge management and a special fund that offers financial support to applicants. Results of the projects 'Valikom' and 'Prototyping Transfer' are expected to be available by the end of this year. If successful the projects will be transferred into the mainstream programmes of the *Bundesagentur für Arbeit* (BA).

In Sweden, in response to the large increase in refugees who often have good but undocumented vocational skills, increased resources have been directed towards bridging courses to increase their scale and scope and develop shorter bridging courses for new arrivals covered by the 'Introduction Act'. Bridging courses are also an integral part of the Swedish fast track initiatives. In cooperation with

employers, bridging courses and work placements are combined. On-the-job language training is also an important component of bridging programmes.

### 3.3 Validation of informal and non-formal skills and competencies

For the standard recognition process refugees need to present their diploma and qualification documents but many of them have limited or no proof at all. In addition, a large proportion of recent arrivals do not have any formal qualifications but possess considerable work experience and informally acquired, though not documented, professional skills. According to the representative data from the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Refugee Survey 78% of refugees who entered Germany between 2013 and 2016 had no vocational or university degree but 73% reported having worked before coming to Germany possessing vocational skills acquired through on-the-job training in trades and technical or commercial professions (Brücker et al., 2016). These figures confirm the need to identify solutions that allow those who have recently arrived to have their skills and competencies identified, documented, assessed and certified. Moreover, where professional skills may not be transferable due to qualification recognition issues, the identification of the scope to utilise transferable skills in other sectors might be important to reduce under-utilisation of professional competence<sup>14</sup>.

Validation aims to make non-formal and informal learning visible in the labour market. Validation is a complex issue, approached in very different ways across EU countries. The possibilities for PES to use existing validation standards, however, are limited due to a lack of standardised tools and limited national regulation of the recognition of work experience and informal qualifications. Where regional or sectoral initiatives and pilots exist (e.g. in Austria, Germany, Italy, and Sweden) there is often no co-ordinated approach. In some Member States such as Bulgaria, Greece, Slovenia or Spain systems

<sup>13</sup> The German PES covers, for example, the cost of recognition. Recognition of foreign certificates is also free of charge in Belgium and Denmark.

<sup>14</sup> Studies (e.g. Chiswick/Miller) however show that professional experience is not easily transferable from the country of origin to the destination country. The acquisition of the necessary work experience in the target country is thus a further factor explaining why it is the case that successful labour market integration takes a relatively long time wages of refugees to match those of domestic labour in comparable jobs.

to validate informal and non-formal learning are yet in an initial phase (see Table 1 in the Annex for an overview). More integrated and standardised systems can be found in Belgium, Denmark, Finland and Norway.

Existing national approaches on the validation of non-formal and informal learning are mostly not designed to take into account specific needs of migrants/refugees. Only one third out of 36 surveyed countries in the 2016 inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning carried out by CEDEFOP have validation initiatives specifically targeted at migrants. Furthermore, country reviews show that validation seldom leads to the award of credentials (CEDEFOP, 2017). Although several countries (e.g. Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Finland, Norway or Sweden) have recently incorporated elements of skills assessment into their integration programmes for refugees, few have done so systematically.

PES might therefore be facing the challenge of developing appropriate and more standardised tools beyond already existing ones. Several PES have started on their own initiative to identify skills at the outset of the integration process. In Austria, PES counsellors can distribute multilingual competency questionnaires for a systematic collection and assessment of competencies in reception centres. The aim is to capture all formal and informal qualifications and skills in one document before the first interview at the employment office takes place. In Latvia, a PES counsellor conducts individual consultations with asylum seekers in reception centres about their job prospects taking into account their previous job experience and available vacancies. PES staff in Sweden also identify skills of people in reception centres and plan services for people who have qualifications and skills which are in demand in the labour market ('Fast track' project).

### 3.3.1 Need to simplify validation procedures

Existing tools are often a combination of structured interviews, aptitude tests, exams, workplace observation related to rather simple activities, practical demonstration of skills in simulation scenarios, and reviews of work samples. Existing tools often also rely on self-assessment. Their use might be, however, limited as refugees and asylum seekers face language barriers that prohibit the ability to assess their own skills and qualifications. Such self-assessment tools might also not be helpful or readily understood by this target

group because their use is not common in the culture of their home countries. Existing instruments might thus not be fit for purpose because they are too reliant on written tests, very time consuming, overly complex and not scalable to huge numbers of asylum seekers. An important aspect in several countries is to offer such skills assessments on a large scale and nationwide.

Effective skills validation and further service provision needs to take into account different aspects: very different skills and qualification levels, language and literacy skills, cultural background, mistrust in public organisations, and employers' needs. Personal contact between PES counsellors and refugees is key to identifying individual barriers and providing the necessary information so that refugees can understand how certain procedures work.

A few PES have recently started to develop more pragmatic and easy-to implement tools, often in cooperation with partners. Such tools take into account more practical design features including being multilingual, culturally sensitive, visual, modularised, easy and quick to use as well as scalable to large numbers.

### 3.3.2 Newly developed pragmatic and easy-to implement tools

Newly developed pragmatic and easy-to implement tools include, for example:

- One-to-one biographical interviews in the refugee's first language;
- IT-based testing of vocational skills;
- Video and image based skills identification techniques;
- E-learning programmes based on relevant cases and examples;
- Self-assessment tests (often in the refugee's first language) with the help of online-guides; and
- Individualised approaches by practical testing/ expertise-check in the workplace or in training institutes.

Country examples of innovative tools developed/ used by PES include Austria, Germany Norway and Sweden. A tool developed by the Austrian PES (AMS) is the 'Competence Check'. The pilot project started at the end of August 2015 in the PES Vienna and has been carried out in the most frequent mother languages of refugees (Arabic, Farsi, French and



Russian). During five weeks each participant had to do five to six hours of one-to-one biographical interviews and 50 hours of workshops covering validation of informal and non-formal skills and practical testing. The 'Competence Check' consists of three steps: assessment of language skills, then of IT skills, education and graduation, and in the last step a check of professional and practical skills. The 'Competence Check' has been further differentiated in one project for female refugees, one for younger male refugees (18-25) and one for those older than 25. The outcomes of the Austrian pilot showed that refugee women are, compared to male refugees, on average higher qualified but lack work experience. Hence a 'Competence Check' for women older than 18 years which lasts two weeks longer and addresses the role of women in the Austrian labour market has been developed in order to provide knowledge on legal regulations and gender equality. Further developments of the tool focus on how to make testing more individual and web-based and how to find a balance of quality and speed for the validation process. The 'Competence Check' has been rolled out nationally in 2016 with over 7000 refugees participating.

From the many pilot projects being developed in Germany over the past two years only a fraction of asylum seekers and refugees benefit. In the PES short-term programme 'Perspective for Refugees' so far 5 000 people have been participating, but the challenge is to assess the skills of 500 000 asylum seekers and refugees. Also the already mentioned 'qualification analysis' to determine non-documented knowledge, skills and competences is time-consuming and must be arranged individually. To provide a standardised assessment tool to be made available nationwide to all employment agencies and jobcentres, the German PES (BA) has been developing in cooperation with partners a tool called 'MySkills', an interactive, computer-based testing tool of vocational skills for persons without formal qualifications. Technology-based tests supported by images and videos are available in six languages. The identification and assessment of existing knowledge has been developed for around 30 occupations (e.g. mechatronics, salesperson or plumber) by identifying differentiated competencies within profession profiles. Testing takes around four hours and is carried out by the psychological department in the employment offices. 'MySkills' is currently piloted and will be operatively launched in all employment offices by April 2018.

The tools developed by the Austrian and German PES assess vocational competences below the level of formal qualifications. The outcomes of the tests/checks are added to the jobseeker's profile or result in updated CVs, providing guidance to the PES counsellor to undertake further steps. As already mentioned, the social partners as key facilitators of the highly regulated VET system have fears that the standards of the dual apprenticeship training could be jeopardised by such exercises. Thus, the results are used mainly as an indication of possible job assignments (qualified placement) and further training needs, but do not award a vocational certificate or degree. They further aim to provide employers with a practice-oriented competence profile and give refugees and asylum seekers realistic feedback on the relevance of acquired skills for the host country's labour market.

As in Norway the PES (NAV) comes in only at a later stage in the integration process, it was the Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning ('Skills Norway') that developed an online self-registration tool to map the individual skills and qualifications of asylum seekers and refugees in the above mentioned special 'integration reception centres'. The tool consists of about 70 different questions covering languages, school and education, and for those with poor educational backgrounds the tool maps basic skills like abilities to use a watch or handle a mobile phone etc. The tool also maps work experience and interests in order to have a foundation to evaluate the individual's possibilities in the Norwegian labour market. Since late 2016 the tool has been used with all new asylum seekers arriving in Norway until July 2017. A further tool is tested in selected reception centres for those who have obtained international protection, or who will most likely receive permits. In this context, the mapping tool aims at identifying where to start the qualification process and to develop measures for the individual. Norway's experience, however, has to be seen rather as a starting point for a pragmatic, easy-to-implement solution that complements more sophisticated assessment procedures (OECD, 2017a).

In Sweden, the PES has been required to secure an early digital mapping of competences before the final decision on granting asylum is made. The early mapping of competencies is done by online guides available in different languages for different professions. Such online guides have been developed to help refugees to assess their own skills and qualifications. In addition to the guides,

an electronic self-assessment tool is included to enable refugees to write an electronic curriculum vitae (CV).

In a few cases, skills assessments lead to the award of an occupational certificate or credential. This is, for example, only the case in Denmark and in the Swedish fast-tracks.

### **3.3.3 The importance and good practices of employers in the validation process**

Partnering and cooperating with labour market representatives is a key success factor for gaining employers' acceptance of validation results. If the final aim of the validation process is the certification of skills equivalent to the ones regularly gained under the national education and VET system, the involvement of employers is critical.

The fast-track approach pursued in Belgium (Flanders) involves feedback from employers to further develop it. As we saw earlier the new Danish basic education and training programme (IGU) targeted at refugees has also been developed in cooperation with social partners. New arrivals get the chance to improve their skills and productivity required to qualify for a job in the Danish labour market gradually over the course of two years. Tripartite agreements with the social partners and 98 municipalities on more than 80 labour market integration measures in the framework of its 'United for better Integration' initiative have been concluded. Most measures have been implemented by amendments to the 'Integration Act' and by a new Act on so-called 'Integration Basic Education'. Companies that recruit refugees or individuals who arrived to reunite with their family within one year of residency receive a bonus worth EUR 5 300, while those who recruit refugees in their second year of residence receive EUR 4 000.

Finland provides a good example of a strong cooperation between all stakeholders. Social partners, including employers, are strongly involved in all aspects from designing the content of qualification requirements to individual validation procedures. Transparency and cooperation promote trust and a high market value of the system, i.e. employers see qualifications gained through validation as equally valuable and trustworthy as the qualifications gained through school-based learning (CE-DEFOP, Country Report Finland, 2017). Stakeholders from businesses have also been involved in the 'MySkills' project of the German PES. The project has

looked for support and cooperation from chambers of commerce and crafts (employers) via the creation of an advisory board accompanying the project. Another good practice example of the involvement of employers, but also of trade unions, is the fast-track initiative of the Swedish government for skills in demand. Sweden has been working closely with employers to introduce fast-track labour market access for skilled refugees (e.g. for doctors, teachers, nurses, chefs, painters, truck drivers). The initiative received a highly positive response from employers and social partners and resulted in a tri-partite cooperation (government agencies, incl. PES, trade unions and employers' organisation) to implement 14 fast-tracks in 31 shortage occupations. The social partners and the PES have put in place a streamlined integration package to fast-track refugees. The scheme combines different validation elements (e.g. early skills mapping, the verification of sector-specific qualifications, on-the job skills assessment and knowledge tests) with customised bridging programmes that include vocational language training. Close contacts between the parties in the fast-track are also important for finding places for internships, vocational qualifications, work placement or work. A recent monitoring report finds that the contact with the parties involved in fast-tracks is closer than before, and communication takes place continuously with a need-driven intensity (Arbetsförmedlingen, 2017).

### **3.3.4 Evaluation results on new validation tools not yet available**

So far very little is known about how differently tools for the validation of non-formal and informal skills work in practice. Most of the newly developed tools are still in the pilot phase and have to be evaluated on their practicality for everyday operational decisions and their transferability to other countries.

With respect to the Austrian 'Competence Check' AMS experts asserted that results of the test on educational attainment and work experience should be more closely linked to perspectives providing guidance for PES staff. Experts also highlighted that there should be a more detailed report on practical skills and competencies.

The monitoring of the piloting phase of the German 'MySkills' project has started recently but an evaluation of the success or failure of the tool by an independent research institute will not begin until 2018. However, insights from implementation and

monitoring reports are able to inform PES managers and practitioners about the feasibility of new PES tools and approaches. The recently published monitoring report on the Swedish fast-track approach shows, for example, that participation numbers are gradually increasing. In March 2017 there were a total of 3 540 people who started a fast-track since January 2016. After one year, between 33% and 52% of participants across all fast-tracks were in employment. The share was lower (23%) in the healthcare sector due to higher requirements for obtaining a credential. The fast track procedure, however, consist of a chain of steps and is not primarily a skills assessment tool<sup>15</sup>.

Empirical evidence based on a control group exists for single programmes put in place by the German PES. Compared to refugees not participating in the BA short-term programme 'Perspective for refugees' (PerF) – combining skills assessment and vocational language courses – participation increases the probability of finding employment by 15.5 percentage points. Other PES services such as general labour market information and professional guidance also show positive outcomes for asylum seekers and refugees. Compared to non-users, the use of these services increases the probability of finding work by 8.4% and 7.5% respectively (Brücker et al., 2016).

### 3.3.5 The transferability of methods developed or used by PES

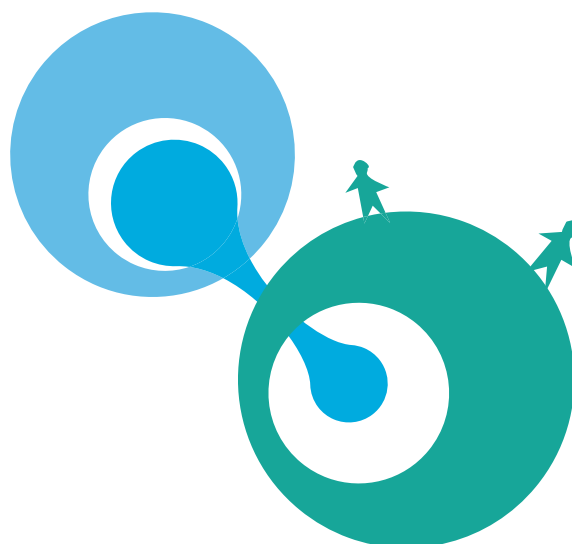
The transferability of the new methods described above depends mainly on PES resources, their financial capabilities and the availability of trained staff. The German 'MySkills' project attracted a lot of attention in the thematic workshop as it has several innovative elements such as videos/images of professional situations independent of lan-

guage and as it is based on testing competencies for specific occupations. Although the operational costs of the new tool might be rather low the incidental costs to set up the system are very high. Open-minded employers are a further prerequisite of such a comprehensive project.

High set up costs, however, might overwhelm the budgets of many PES and could only be justified in countries with high number of refugees when tools are also used for other vulnerable groups such as low-skilled nationals. However, some elements might be worth considering to translate to other national contexts. The use of images/videos for the testing of specific professional competencies in the 'MySkills' project could, for example, easily be adapted to the Austrian context as both countries have a similar regulated VET system.

For PES with low budgets and for those dealing with low numbers of refugees (or with uneven distributed numbers at regional level) the use of simple tools, such as the multilingual questionnaires in the Austrian PES, might be a good idea to implement. Online tools developed in Norway and Sweden could also be adapted to other countries and used by PES for a first check of skills and competencies. Finally, PES could learn from countries which successfully involved employers in the validation process. By making skills and qualifications visible PES in some countries have started a communication process around those skills with employers focusing thus more on the potential and talents of people and less on their 'refugee status.'

15 The Swedish PES is still working on new methods and support services to enable qualitative skills mapping. For the fast-tracks there are industry-specific validation agreements in place. Validation models vary between industries but in most cases skills are tested against actual professional skills and ability to practice the profession. The professional competence assessment takes place in a work environment and can last for three weeks, where a compensation of about EUR 80 (800 SEK) per day is paid to individual employer. A test of competencies is also possible in the framework of a preparatory training lasting 12 to 14 weeks (Arbetsförmedlingen, 2017).





## 4. OPERATIONALISATION OF THE RESULTS

Qualitative skills mapping is a prerequisite to match the right person to the right working place or training course. The assessment of skills might make it not only easier for those eligible to work to find a job but also help to identify appropriate integration programmes (e.g. vocation-specific language courses and targeted job-related training). It might also inform dispersed residence decisions.

The results of the above-described assessment exercises are mostly used by PES internally to plan and provide tailor made services for a personalised approach. For PES, it is not only important to identify skills and qualifications as early as possible but also to combine a more thorough validation process and its results systematically with more focused labour market integration measures.

Depending on the results of the Austrian 'Competence Check' (no, low, sufficient or good skills), refugees are offered a tailor-made qualification measure, such as job-related training or other ALMPs. The Austrian PES, however, is challenged to create a more systematic and standardised 'integration pathway' as the Austrian government agreed in early 2017 on a new legislative proposal that foresees the introduction of an obligatory 'Integration Year' for refugees and certain asylum seekers. Participation will be obligatory for a minimum of 12 months or until participants enter employment.

In Finland, a quick identification of professional skills of asylum seekers in reception centres is taken into consideration when choosing a settlement area that offers education and business opportunities to match these skills. After asylum seekers have been granted residence, their skills will be assessed more comprehensively and used for a more flexible and personal integration pathway, e.g. through work trials, training modules or education for entrepreneurship. As already mentioned, the results of the validation process in the Belgian, Norwegian and Swedish fast-tracks are used for occupation-related language courses and/or for supplementary educational initiatives.

The results of 'MySkills' are used to ensure compatibility with the job placement process of the German PES. They are used by the PES staff as the

basis for a decision to provide dedicated services and additional measures in the context of a personalised approach.

In the context of the sequencing of services, combining different training modules or combining language courses with job placement and (part-time) training in parallel are deemed to be more effective than mere sequential approaches. Due to the preference of many asylum seekers and refugees to earn money quickly in order to support their families at home, a phased approach of 'work first' and on-the-job upskilling might be a feasible solution.

Instead of investing a lot of time and money to train asylum seekers and refugees within the established VET system for several years ('train first'), the German PES favours a 'work first' approach which offers in parallel (low-skilled) work with (part-time) vocational training aimed at leading to a formal vocational certificate required for career progression on the German labour market in the longer run. The model 'Kommit', to be jointly run by the Office for Migration and Integration, employers and the PES, covers vocational language and training courses, with implementation planned to take place in four phases. In a similar vein, the guiding integration principle in Denmark is now 'work from day one'. To this purpose, the Danish government has made a series of amendments to its 'Integration Act' in 2016 with a work first view to facilitating the labour market integration of newly-arrived families and migrants seeking protection ('United for better integration').

Developing an individual integration plan has been proven to be a good way to accompany and steer the individual integration process. Drawing up (mandatory) individualised integration plans is a longstanding practice in Scandinavian countries. There is, however, only selective evidence on what kind of ALMP measures work for migrants/refugees. An evaluation from Finland shows that individual integration plans seem to have increased the time spent in language courses and training while scaling down traditional ALMP such as job-seeking courses resulting in better outcomes. The authors interpret their findings as a suggestion to focus on improving the quality of the match between immigrants' pre-

existing skills and the training offered which may substantially improve the efficiency of ALMP for migrants (Sarvimäki and Hämäläinen, 2016).

In Sweden educational and professional skills in the fast-track project are assessed and validated according to industry-specific requirements in co-operation with trade unions and employers' organisations as described above. What might be interest-

ing for other countries is the possibility to transfer existing skills to other professions. In cases where the validation leads to a statement in which the person's professional code changes, a new plan is drawn up. The fast-track process might, thus, open up the possibility to 'transfer' formal and informal skills and competencies acquired in the home country to also qualify for other professions in the host country.

## 5. ISSUES TO FURTHER REFLECT ON



Country examples of PES initiatives around skills, competencies and qualifications of asylum seekers and refugees discussed at the thematic workshop made clear that PES mainly concentrate on identification of skills.

### ***Assessment and certification of skills need further development***

In this context a trade-off between rapid skills identification and formal, in-depth validation procedures might arise. Following clear (preferential) treatment rules the two might be reconciled as the Finnish example shows. A quick skills identification exercise in the reception centre to choose a settlement area is followed by an in-depth assessment once settled.

### ***A step-wise approach to skills assessments***

Such an approach could start with a swift skills' mapping at the start of the asylum claim procedure followed by an in-depth assessment which builds on the results of the former. Such an approach might, however, require an ongoing discussion with stakeholders.

The procedures for skills assessment and the recognition of the equivalence of professional qualifications are currently strictly separate in most countries. Skill assessments could also be used as a first step towards professional recognition aiming to provide refugees with qualification-oriented employment.

A big concern in the thematic workshop was the work with employers.

### ***To work with employers is crucial***

In order to change employers' attitude towards refugees PES should act as labour market advocates. Proposals such as pro-actively campaigning for the benefits of integrating refugees and sending PES counsellors as trainers/mentors to companies to support refugees at the workplace are worth further reflection.

### ***Motivating refugees to up-skill***

On the other side, it is equally important to consider methods of motivating refugees (particularly young people) to take up training by demonstrating the labour market relevance of training including dual vocational training. For PES it might also be important to consider methods of reaching out to those who are already in work and 'underemployed', i.e. in jobs that are not commensurate with their existing skills and abilities.

Intercultural training for PES staff might be necessary to better prepare counsellors to work with refugees, i.e. to improve understanding of the personal situation of each individual which requires knowledge of their origin and culture. It is also important to raise awareness in order to reflect on one's own actions and their effects on others. In this context it might be important to reflect on whether a change in perspective is required from focusing on the 'refugee' as the barrier to focusing on addressing barriers to jobs in terms of skills.

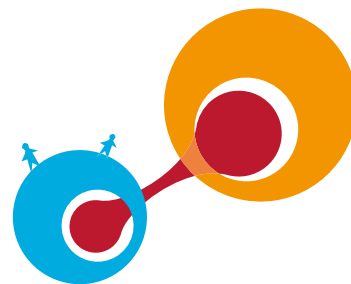
### ***Alternative pathways for labour market integration***

For PES it might also be worth further reflecting on 'alternative pathways' for labour market integra-

tion which begin with temporary employment in a related field. The idea behind such an approach is that an individual with a qualification obtained abroad begins employment in a position that requires little or no additional training but that relates to the profession in which he/she has experience and training. Temporary employment in a related field can allow the refugee to acquire vocational-specific language, build contacts and strengthen his/her understanding of the local labour market. Another possibility which might be something PES staff should consider more often is to think about 'Start-up Refugees' by identifying and supporting those who have been running businesses in their home countries.

### **Shift of PES focus towards very vulnerable groups of refugees**

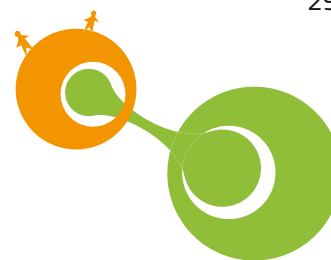
Finally, another question raised by participants is to what extent PES need to shift their focus and concentrate on the integration of very vulnerable groups of refugees (disabled, illiterate and with very low skills). Recently several PES have been focusing on highly qualified newcomers in prioritising fast-track approaches.



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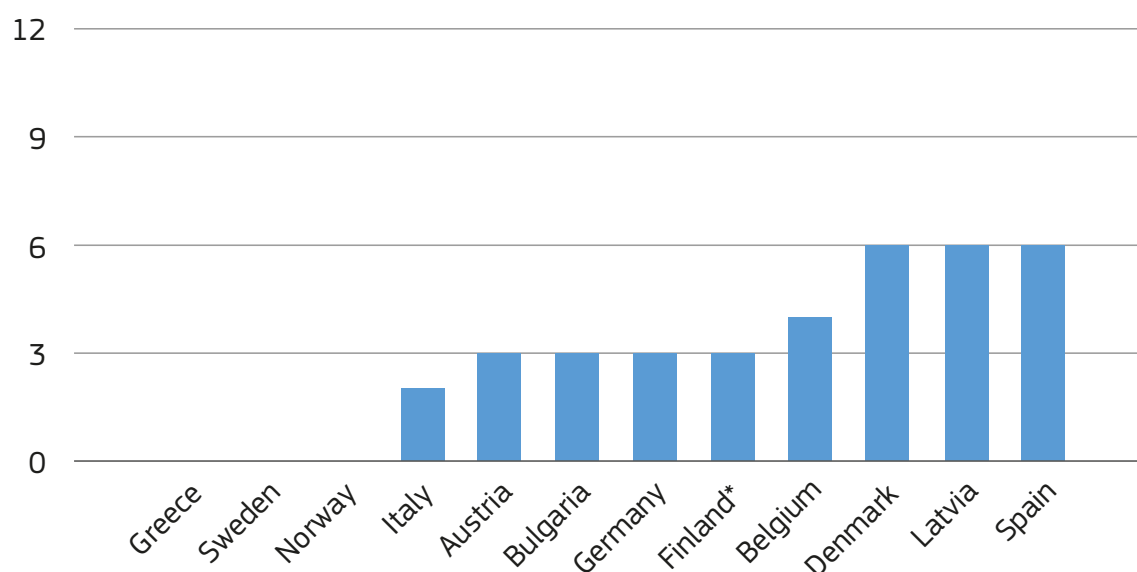
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## APPENDIX

**Figure A1: Minimum waiting periods for accessing the labour market for asylum seekers in participating Member States, in months**



Source: EEPO (June 2016) incl. recent changes in Italy and Latvia

\*Finland: 3 months with a valid ID, 6 months otherwise.

### Resident labour market tests and sectoral restrictions

**Austria:** labour market access is subject to a labour market test and restricted to specific sectors (tourism and agriculture and apprenticeships in shortage occupations).

**Bulgaria:** the labour market test as a means to test the need to employ a foreign worker was abolished, and a list of shortage professions was introduced instead.

**Germany:** the priority review, which examined whether the job could be occupied by a German or other EU citizen, has recently been abolished (temporarily) in regions with a good labour market situation.

**Greece:** requirement to obtain a work permit and pass a labour market test for registered asylum seekers was abolished in April 2016.

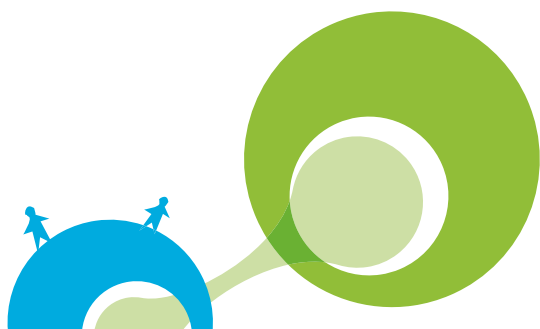
**Norway:** asylum interview is a pre-requisite.

**Sweden:** labour market access only for asylum seekers with valid IDs.

Table A1: Validation of informal and non-formal skills and competences for labour market purposes

COUNTRY	VALIDATION OF (INFORMAL/NON-FORMAL) SKILLS AND COMPETENCES	VALIDATION TARGETED AT MIGRANTS/REFUGEES
Austria	No uniform framework.	AMS initiative 'Competence Checks'.
Belgium (Walloon)	Validation of competences (VDC) is highly standardised. LE FOREM is one partner (out of five) in the CVDC consortium.	Pilot project by LE FOREM.
Bulgaria	Recent introduction of a systematic approach; shared responsibilities between public institutions and social partners.	Lack of specific initiatives.
Denmark	Regulated by laws; nationally set formal framework includes in the 'pre-phase' job centres, trade unions, employers' associations, and civic education institutions, and online guidance service.	New initiatives; ongoing process to develop new tools; new web portal; tripartite agreement with the social partners and a bipartite agreement with the municipalities.
Finland	Long established system. Regulated by several laws. Strong cooperation between all stakeholders.	Pilot projects.
Germany	'Qualification analysis' regulated by the 'Recognition Act' (2012). No uniform legal framework for informal/non-formal skills assessment but many initiatives on a pilot or regional level.	Initiatives implemented by different bodies; PES (BA) 'MySkills' pilot: Interactive IT-based testing of vocational skills; assessments for 30 occupations.
Greece	Strategy for validation is currently in development.	No specific initiatives in place.
Italy	Development of a national framework still in an initial phase.	Many pilot and regional projects but no national initiative in place.
Latvia	Responsibility of State Education Quality Service.	No specific initiatives.
Norway	Uniform legal framework. Assessment by educational institutions. NAV responsible for information and guidance in municipal employment centres.	'Skills Norway' (Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning) commissioned to develop online, self-guided tool.
Slovenia	National validation system still in an initial phase; recognition of prior learning educational institutions. Awareness-raising activities by PES.	No specific policy in place.
Spain	National validation system still in its initial phase; Interministerial Commission responsible for the coordination of agreements.	No specific initiatives in place.
Sweden	Validations system rather fragmented – PES negotiates with external actors performing the task.	PES commissioned in cooperation with social partners to develop 'Fast-track' methods and procedures.

Source: Questionnaire on 'PES initiatives around Skills, Competencies and Qualifications of Refugees and Asylum Seekers'; CEDEFOP (2017) European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning, country reports 2016.



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