



The UK Asylum Seekers Mainstreaming Partnership – ASSET UK is part funded by the European Social Fund under the Equal Community Initiative Programme

Equal ASSET UK - Beneficiaries Meeting - 16 March 2005

The following is an account of a meeting that took place in Birmingham on 16 March 2005 prior to Equal ASSET UK conference "Towards an employment strategy for asylum seekers".

The aim of the meeting was to provide a free and open forum structured round three main questions which would allow beneficiaries of the various partners an opportunity to share their experiences, comment on the programme as they experienced it and to highlight what they perceived as positive and negative aspects of the programme.

Finally, they were asked to briefly comment on the concept of voluntary return and the applicability and transferability of the skills they have learnt for those asylum seekers or refugees who may decide to return to their country of origin.

The meeting was facilitated by Edin Hromadzic , Project Development Officer, Equal ASSET UK , and Deborah Harvey, Project Worker with the West Midlands Asylum Support Team, Refugee Council. For reasons of confidentiality, all beneficiary participants will be referred to by initial only in the body of the text.

The facilitators opened the meeting by introducing themselves and explaining the purpose of the day- as well as a few house rules.

After that Lynda Lawrence - Equal ASSET UK Partnership Manager did a presentation on the work of Equal ASSET UK Partnership which helped beneficiaries to better understand complexity and various aspects of the partnership

After that participants introduced themselves and said a little bit about their background and their experience of EQUAL

There were nine participants – 3 from NICEM, 2 from NIACE, 2 from TES, and 2 from Sheffield College. The countries of origin were Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Colombia, Iran, Congo (Brazzaville), Congo (Democratic Republic), Pakistan, Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast. Only four of the students had any knowledge of English before they came to the United Kingdom. Four of the students were studying ESOL and computers, and four of the students were studying for professional or vocational qualifications. The participants had been in the UK for varying amounts of time, from five years to 3 years to 1

year to five months. Only one of the participants had received a (positive) decision on their asylum claim since joining the partnership.

The facilitators then introduced a list of topics for discussion by the group and recorded their answers on a flip-chart

Workshop 1

The courses beneficiaries had attended

The usefulness of such courses

What could be improved?

Most clients attending courses in Belfast had found about them via the liaison officer with NICEM. As for courses in other places, clients had either found about the courses from friends, from advertisements in a doctor's surgery or posters from outreach work in the emergency accommodation. G suggested that when asylum seekers arrived in the country or when they are dispersed, they should be given an information pack to help them find further education, because there is lack of information on free education. There should also be general information on educational orientation such as transport arrangements (free buses) and teaching material (books etc...) M. suggested that this information could be provided by agencies such as the Refugee Council or that there could have a separate surgery or central information point for accessing such resources. G felt this could also be facilitated by outreach workers in emergency accommodation, and also a greater use of a skills audit at the point of entry into the United Kingdom.

Five of the participants were unable to speak any English before they entered the United Kingdom. Although they all possessed a considerable amount of practical skill and work experience, they found it difficult to transfer these to the English work place because of the language barrier. L. was qualified in computer training in her home country in French, she also possessed a considerable amount of experience in childcare but found her lack of English to be a barrier. Me. was a qualified hairdresser from Iran but found that her qualifications were not recognized here. She was keen to improve her spoken English but also her technical vocabulary for this particular job.

Six of the participants were on training courses that combined English language skills with the acquisition of other skills. AL wanted to be a computer technician and felt that too much time had been spent in the classroom. She would prefer it if classes were combined with a work placement. They all agreed that the course was very useful but what they also wanted was more practice, more materials and more work placements.

One of the participants from Derby had actually found a whole new career through his involvement with the programme. He stated that in his country of origin, he had never even heard of the profession of social work. When he first arrived in the UK, he paid for a language course out of his own savings. When he was dispersed to Derby, he saw a poster advertising free courses for asylum seekers. He is currently studying for a sociology degree at Derby

University as well as undertaking volunteer work with a Derby housing association. Similarly, one of the participants from NICEM felt that her training in computing and ESOL had given her the confidence to research setting up her own business.

Two of the participants had work experience, which they felt would allow them to directly access the UK labour market. S was originally employed as an aeronautic and logistics engineer in his country of origin. He was studying English at an intermediate level with NICEM. His main barrier was the fact that he had not yet received a decision on his asylum claim and was therefore currently unable to work. M. was a qualified doctor in his country of origin - Equal ASSET UK had helped him with books and materials, and had also helped him with the voluntary placement in a hospital. Equal ASSET UK had also helped him to obtain funding for the PLAB exam, which would allow him to use his previous experience and qualifications in the United Kingdom, and work towards GMC registration.

All the participants appeared to be very enthusiastic and motivated. Several mentioned that classes once or twice a week was not enough, as contact with native English speakers was so limited. C. mentioned that English classes should start in emergency accommodation as clients often felt disorientated and de-motivated at this time. All agreed that education and training needed to start as soon as people arrived in the country, not when they received a decision on their asylum claim. All the NICEM students mentioned that it was useful to have a named person who could liaise with the tutors if there were any problems. They felt that NICEM was very supportive, dealing with problems, talking to teachers. All students said that they would like to see more consistent and stable funding, so that everybody would be able to benefit from this program.

M. pointed out that involvement with Equal ASSET UK activities helped him to forget about his problems, because when you are involved in learning it calms you down and helps you to deal with the depression and traumas inherent in being an asylum seeker or refugee.

The general perception among all participants was that experience from your home country doesn't count here and that therefore volunteering became essential because of the need for references.

The main barrier to effective volunteering that was identified by the group was the CRB check (that is the Criminal Records Bureau check). M. said this was the main barrier for anyone wishing to volunteer to work with vulnerable people or positions of trust, such as doctors or teachers. There was obviously a particular difficulty for asylum seekers or refugees, as often the Home Office would be unable or unwilling to check in the country of origin. It could also be difficult for documents to come from countries in upheaval. There was also felt to be a need for general education for agencies involved in volunteering.

“Frequently employers are not aware of rules regarding asylum seekers and their entitlement to volunteering and they don't want to take responsibility.”

Overall, the perception of volunteering and the participant's experiences of it were extremely positive. French speaking participants had been teachers in their country of origin. They had become aware of the work of the project through ESOL classes in the emergency accommodation in Birmingham. Now one of them is volunteering as a teaching assistant. He said he felt that the project helped to handle his time, rebuilt his confidence and reduced his stress. He also felt that it gave him valuable insight into the English style of teaching and classroom management. The other participant has become involved in volunteer work in the TES office as well as directly applying his previous training in ESOL and computing to the construction of an information pack for asylum seekers arriving in Birmingham. Both of them wanted to see more cascaded training for volunteers to deliver or assist in delivering ESOL training. They also wanted to see refugee teachers helped to re-qualify to teach in the UK, similar to the scheme for refugee doctors.

Workshop 2 –

What was positive about the project?

What was negative about the project?

What would they change?

The participants were split into two groups to discuss these points, and then recorded their points on a flip chart. Finally, they nominated a representative to report back to the group as a whole. Both groups were uncomfortable with the idea of recording 'negative' impressions of the project so it was agreed to change this to 'constructive suggestions'.

Positive Aspects of the Project

- Helps to improve English language
- Enables us to have contact with people from different cultures and with people working in a multi - cultural environment
- Helps with opportunities to be involved with volunteer activities
- Provides opportunities to visit different places (visit to countryside, Birmingham etc....)
- Help to broaden horizons- i.e. think of different careers
- Provided them with the practical help needed to study (books, bus passes, stationary..)
- Help to become more employable
- Initial assessment & further guidance in the future careers
- Improves skills and English language so that we can integrate into the British society

Constructive suggestions:

- Arranging more voluntary work so that refugees /asylum seekers won't lose their skills
- Stop NASS support after a set period and allow asylum seekers (the ones capable of doing so) to work.
ASSET UK should try to influence different branches of industry and the Home Office to let asylum seekers work. There is no point of funding the training when the beneficiaries can't do anything with it. (Skill audits should be used more widely and in conjunction with Job Centers to match existing vacancies. The government doesn't need to import workers!).
- Equal ASSET should do more to stop negative propaganda in the media about asylum seekers and do more to promote positive propaganda
- Funding should continue
- A joint internet site should be produced for all existing projects.
It seems that some of the beneficiaries are not aware that there is Equal ASSET UK website.
- An information pack about education to be given to all asylum seekers on arrival
- The project should raise awareness, and recommend to the relevant bodies, of asylum seekers potential and the use of their skills
- ASSET UK should promote a newsletter to publicize stories of success/beneficiaries
- One of the partners should be dedicated to promoting the work of the Project as well as counteracting negative stories; i.e. a post dedicated to writing about the projects and the work they are doing. (in Derby they tried to organise positive stories about asylum seekers to be published, but the press agencies pulled out at the last minute.). Equal ASSET UK might do separate issue of the newsletter with the positive stories from asylum seekers.
- Asylum seekers have problem with their ID Cards. They are not being recognized as a form of ID, and the Home Office often takes the asylum seeker's passport. To aid with easier access to volunteering some raising awareness needs to be done with voluntary agencies
- Asylum seekers could do volunteering for more mainstream charities, other than those dealing solely with asylum seekers and refugees, to help them to integrate.