



Labour market advice and job placement of refugees: Labour market integration is still a long way off

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A few refugees get a job soon after they arrived in Germany. However, for most of them labour market integration is still a long way off. Before getting a job, many refugees have to learn German and engage in retraining or vocational education and training. As far as labour market integration of refugees is concerned, job counsellors in the public employment service play an essential role. In an extensive research project the Institute for Employment Research (IAB) has analysed the process of labour market advice and job placement of refugees.

Labour market integration of refugees considerably contributes to their social integration. If refugees find a job, they may earn their living and get in contact with native people. Furthermore, regular communication at the workplace assists in learning the German language. However, the labour market integration of refugees constitutes a challenge for public employment services. Most of the refugees are neither familiar with life in Germany nor with the German labour market. They flee from violence, war, military service, persecution, discrimination, poverty or other hopeless circumstances. Before they reach

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Germany, many refugees have gone through cruelties. Thus, when administration staff meet refugees, job counsellors need empathy, intercultural understanding and legal knowledge. They have to be open-minded and sensitive to the specific situation of refugees. Finally (and obviously), they must be able to identify a refugee's skills, competence and motivation in order to give them labour market advice and to back their job placement.

Given the complex challenge of integrating refugees into the German labour market, a research project of the IAB has asked how public employment service's labour market advice and job placement help integrating refugees into the labour market. An extensive report with the results of the project has been published in German in [IAB-Forschungsbericht 5/2017](#).

Refugees are motivated but lack German language skills and vocational qualifications

The experts interviewed by the researchers emphasised that the refugees in general are highly motivated to find a job. This appraisal of refugees' motivation is confirmed by [a survey](#) conducted by the IAB, the Federal Office of Migration and Refugees and the [Socio-Economic Panel](#) at the German Institute for Economic Research. From June to December 2016, more than 4,500 refugees had been questioned. 78 percent of unemployed refugees answered "definitely" when they were asked whether they were planning to work in the future; another 15 percent answered "probably".

Most refugees are highly motivated to work. However, they frequently do not get a job because they do not at all or do hardly speak German and have no certificate of their qualifications. Furthermore, the refugees' skills and competences often do not match employers' demand. There are a few exceptions, like doctors from Syria or engineers from Iraq who are quickly getting a job. However, for most refugees integration into the German labour market is a long way off. As the survey of refugees in Germany, already mentioned above, shows, only nine percent of refugees who arrived in Germany in 2015 and 2016 are employed. If residence continues, the employment rate increases. Among the refugees who arrived in Germany in 2013 or earlier roughly one third are already employed – but this also means that around two third are still unemployed. Thus, there is a need for labour market advice and job placement of refugees. Furthermore, job counsellors also advise and support employers. They consider both the supply side and the demand side of the labour market.

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Language skills are the key to job counselling

Speaking a common language is a prerequisite for labour market advice. As soon as a refugee arrives at the employment agency, communication problems arise. Nevertheless, job counsellors and refugees usually succeed in realising the first conversation. The issues they talk about are quite simple, like the identification of personal data. Moreover, employment agencies provide a number of tools. They lay out brochures written in the languages of the main countries of origin, are in contact with interpreters and use a hotline that has been installed by the Federal Employment Agency in order to solve communication problems. Furthermore, sometimes refugees are accompanied by people who speak German and may translate the conversation. Finally, a few job counsellors speak the language of a refugee's country of origin. While the first conversations work out despite different languages, communication problems increase afterwards, when subjects get more complex. A common language is essential, if job counsellors shall identify skills and competences of refugees and give them advice on their labour market perspective. The participation in measures of active labour market policy also requires that refugees speak German.

Job counselling and work experience go hand in hand

Language acquisition, the identification of skills and competences and the use of instruments of active labour market policies contribute to the integration into the job market and the educational system. However, they do not necessarily represent successive steps on the way to get a job or an apprenticeship but may be combined into a single measure, as several integration measures provided by the Federal Employment Agency show. The agency has developed tailor-made measures for refugees in general as well as for female refugees and young refugees in particular. The measures combine counselling with work experience. Refugees shall show their skills, learn German for vocational use and get an idea of how to act within the German labour market. Several interviewees stated that the period refugees spent in a workplace is crucial to their skill assessment and vocational orientation. When job counsellors give advice to refugees, they take the information about the respective person into account they get from the chamber of industry and commerce, the chamber of handicrafts, educational institutions or other organisations that provide integration measures at the local level.

Employers are open-minded towards recruiting

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refugees but demanding

In principle, employers are open-minded with respect to refugees, as the interviewees in the public employment services reported. Firms employ refugees or plan to employ refugees in order to satisfy their demand for labour, to cultivate their image or to fulfil a societal responsibility. However, the interviewees also reported that firms consider carefully whether a refugee's skills and competences really match with the qualifications required by a vacancy. Firms do not look for a refugee but for a mechanic, a sales assistant or a cook.

The interviewees in the employment agencies described how job placement of refugees is hampered by both refugees and employers. While refugees often speak poorly German and may not be able to give adequate information about their qualifications, employers fear a bureaucratic burden and legal uncertainty. Legal uncertainty arises when the asylum procedure is pending. Then, it is uncertain whether a refugee will later receive a residence permit and get unrestricted access to the labour market. Asylum seekers may be employed, only if the immigration authority gives a permission to work. In some cases, also the employment agency has to approve before a refugee is allowed to work. The same applies to refugees who have not been granted asylum but may stay in Germany because of humanitarian or health reasons.

Face-to-face contact facilitates job placement

Job counsellors may reduce the legal uncertainty and the bureaucratic burden employers fear. An interviewee described the contact with an employer. The local branch of the chamber of industry and commerce had organised an event where employers and refugees met. There, a young refugee and a manager of a small enterprise talked and agreed with each other about a work placement. The job counsellor also attended the event. She assured the manager that the work placement does not face any legal obstacles and sent him information documents and the required forms. Soon after, the refugee started to work in the small enterprise.

The example shows how a face-to-face contact facilitates the placement of refugees in a job, a training place or a work experience. In general, face-to-face contact matters in three dimensions: between the job counsellor and the refugee, between the job counsellor and the employer and between the refugee and the employer. By conversation, job counsellors inform refugees of the labour market and the educational system in Germany. They look at a refugee's vocational prospects, support their vocational orientation and offer measures of active labour market policy. Moreover, counsellors of the public recruitment service for

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employers contact firms and enterprises in order to promote the employment of refugees. Finally, the employment agencies initiate and organise a number of events that create opportunities for refugees and employers to meet, like job fairs or speed dating. Firms may present their organisation and their production, while refugees may get an impression of the jobs offered in Germany. In a similar vein, refugees may demonstrate some of their qualities, whereas employers may get an impression of the respective person. In general, face-to-face contact contributes to the reduction of prejudices and uncertainty and enables direct agreements between refugees and employers.

The analysis of the interviews conducted in five administrative districts of the Federal Employment Agency shows three ideal ways refugees may be integrated into the labour market. They are not mutually exclusive but may overlap and complement each other.

Quick labour market integration occurs occasionally and mainly in unskilled work

A quick labour market integration as a result of public employment service labour market advice and job placement represents an exception. Many refugees are under pressure or wish to earn money soon after they have arrived in Germany. They have to pay for the expenses of the flight, are supposed to support their family in their country of origin or want to live without state aid. Given the language skills and vocational qualifications required by employers, a quick labour market integration predominantly occurs with respect to unskilled work. However, language skills are also needed in unskilled jobs, in particular if employees have to be instructed in issues of health and safety at the workplace. Moreover, the demand for unskilled or semi-skilled work at the local labour market usually does not suffice to employ all the refugees who wish to work. Labour market integration is facilitated, if staff members of a company speak Arabic or another language of a refugee's country of origin. However, such companies are rare.

Labour market integration of refugees is a lengthy process

In contrast to the first way of fast labour market integration, the second one takes a longer period of time. In this case, retraining or vocational education and training precedes labour market integration. In order to support refugees, job counsellors apply the same measures of active labour market policy they also use when they deal with other unemployed people. This strategy also requires some language skills. In addition, problems with the retraining and

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vocational education and training of refugees may arise, if the duration of lessons exceeds the duration of the residence permit.

Vocational education and training is a good means to integrate young refugees

The third way of labour market integration applies to young refugees. Giving young refugees labour market advice constitutes a challenge for job counsellors. They have to both inform and persuade the refugees since, in Germany, a certificate of vocational education and training increases the likelihood of getting a decent job but, in order to get the certificate, the refugees have to make the effort to learn for several years. Many refugees are not familiar with the German education system and the dual model of German vocational education and training that combines theoretical classes in a vocational school and company-based training. The same applies to their relatives in their country of origin many young refugees regularly communicate with. The parents of refugees often expect their children either to make money in the short-term in order to support their family or to study at a university. Thus, a lack of knowledge according to the German labour market and short-term pressures may hamper long-term gains or plans. The benefit of vocational education and training may best be explained to young refugees when events of vocational guidance addressed to all pupils in general take place at school, as several interviewees stated. Thus, the interviewees suggest that not only school-age refugees but also refugees who are not required to attend school should attend classes and participate in events of vocational guidance.

Conclusion

The labour market advice and job placement of refugees, as they currently take place in employment agencies, differ from the procedure of information exchange that directly connects labour supply to labour demand. Although job counsellors occasionally place refugees in a job or a training, the labour market advice and job placement of refugees constitute a long-term responsibility. First, refugees shall learn German, make up their mind with respect to their vocational alternatives and acquire vocational qualifications or have their qualifications recognised. Furthermore, companies do not consider refugees when they fill job vacancies due to legal uncertainty. Moreover, companies often expect from refugees the skills a vacancy requires at the first day of employment.

For the past years many refugees have arrived in Germany and more will arrive in the future. Given the situation sketched above, the labour market integration of refugees requires effort,

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patience and time. Refugees have to make an effort to learn German and to acquire vocational qualifications. Employers have to be patient when refugees need a longer training period than other employees. Many refugees are not familiar with routines and workflows in Germany and still have to learn more than employees who have been living in the host country for a number of years. Finally, public employment services need endurance in order to further labour market integration step by step and together with the respective refugee. Thus, it will still take a long time until most refugees will have acquired qualifications sufficient for getting a job in Germany and firms will be prepared to train or to employ refugees to a larger extent than at present.

The project

The project analysed public employment services in five administrative districts of the Federal Employment Agency. German public employment services divide into employment agencies and jobcentres. While employment agencies offer support to asylum seekers and asylum applicants, jobcentres are responsible for refugees after the asylum procedure has been finished, if a refugee is entitled both to remain in Germany and to receive funding from the basic income security scheme. The research findings are mainly based on interviews with experts from employment agencies, but also take into account jobcentres and organisations that look after refugees.

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