

Bridges to highly qualified employment for immigrants and refugees

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Our universities, research institutions and companies benefit from the immigration of students and graduates. But how attractive is it for young people with ambitions to make their way to Germany? What are we doing to ease the rocky road that awaits those who set out to find their fortune in Europe?

Like all universities, Leibniz University of Hannover has become increasingly international in recent years. Many young people come from all over the world to complete their entire studies here, or to obtain a Master's degree. Among them, there have also been more and more refugees in recent years. They also find their first access to the University of Hannover in our institution, in the guest student programme.

As a technical university, we train primarily for industry, and that is why we want to turn to the situation in industrial companies in our discussion today.

What is the background for our topic?

We would like to address a topic that, in our opinion, has a niche existence: the possibility of companies to reduce barriers for highly qualified employment of immigrants. We would like to emphasise that we find it very necessary that there is a debate in the public space about asylum and residence rights, as well as about the provision of language courses and housing, about access to public services and administration. Companies also rightly complain about bureaucracy and uncertainties when recruiting skilled workers with non-German passports. Today, however, our topic will be what companies can nevertheless do to recruit and retain immigrant skilled workers who are already in the country and to offer them professional work that is appropriate to their qualifications. The very large group of immigrants in Europe is as diverse and heterogeneous as all societies are diverse and heterogeneous. Many people bring valuable skills and formal qualifications with them, regardless of whether they leave their country because of flight and displacement, or because they want to improve their economic situation, or because they have formed personal ties.

Let's take the group of refugees as an example: the representative Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) shows that many refugees remain professionally far below their skills. Forty per cent attended secondary schools in their country of origin and thirty-four per cent already have a higher school leaving certificate (cf. Brücker et al., p. 20 f.). Nineteen per cent attended a technical school or a high school in their country of origin. Many are also at an age when they are just starting their professional careers.

More than three quarters of the refugees interviewed shortly after their arrival (2013-16) in Germany wanted to attend an educational institution. The fact that in the panel survey a few years later only less than a quarter had actually entered the regular education system is described as a "pronounced gap between educational aspirations and the participation in education and training programmes realised so far" (ibid., p. 23).

Almost half of the respondents who have taken up employment (47 per cent, *ibid.*, p. 34) are also affected by de-skilling. They state that the level of requirements of their current job is below their previous job in their country of origin. The increased proportion of those who work as assistants is also significant: only fifteen per cent in their country of origin, compared to forty-four per cent in Germany (*ibid.*, p. 33).

The framework conditions for participation in education are particularly difficult; the acquisition of the German language alone takes several years for most refugees. Other reasons for delayed entry into language courses are the length of asylum procedures and the associated uncertainty of residence status in Germany (*ibid.*, p. 24ff.). Legal and formal rules limit the scope of action of refugees.

Women are much more disadvantaged than men in terms of participation in education and employment. The authors of the IAB study refute the assumption that it is primarily traditional role models in a Muslim culture that restrict women's participation. The survey impressively shows that care and family work is not distributed more unequally in refugee families than in German families. Among the respondents, the agreement with women's participation in the labour market is as strong as in the German population. The women among the refugees are generally just as well qualified as the men, but on average have less work experience that can be utilised in the German labour market. It is also mentioned that women more frequently state that they suffer from post-traumatic stress disorders. (Cf. *ibid.*, p. 48ff.) It is clear that the situation of women is accompanied by special problems.

From the point of view of the labour market, it is a question of wasted human resources. After all, skilled workers are urgently needed in many areas, in nursing, in the trades, in industry, in the social economy or in IT. Some experts speak of a figure of 400,000 immigrants needed per year (cf. interview in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 27.8.2021)

Of course, we know that people cannot simply be regarded as human resources that can be shifted back and forth. Who can supposedly be treated as a mass to fill gaps in our labour markets. This is what qualitative research has shown in recent years. Researchers from the SoFI in Göttingen (2021) examined typical training and employment relationships of refugees and recorded the perspective of those affected. Typical sectors of the labour market in which many immigrants end up are the meat industry, building, cleaning, online mail order and health care. The authors describe that often the harshest working conditions and discrimination damage the health of the workers and promote their "social isolation" rather than the acquisition of the German language.

Apprenticeships in industry and crafts, on the other hand, are comparatively privileged and access to them is described as full of hurdles. The conditions of learning at school and in the company are also extremely challenging, as there is no additional, language-sensitive support, with the justification of not wanting to trigger envy and xenophobia in the company. For this reason, the best candidates are selected for apprenticeships and, according to the researchers, it is not uncommon to find refugees in dual training who had started or completed a university degree in their country of origin.

"As a consequence of these hurdles, it is mainly people who have already had very extensive qualifications who end up in an apprenticeship and successfully complete it. For this group of people, however, the training they take up represents a de-qualification compared to previous professional and educational experiences. In the self-perception and future planning of those affected, the apprenticeship is therefore often only an emergency and transitional solution, which is intended to facilitate the path into other occupations and educational institutions." (*ibid.*, p. 54)

Other qualitative studies (cf. Maaroufi 2020) show similar findings. Statistically successful labour market integration is therefore by no means sustainable, especially if people's own ideas about work and education are constantly undermined. Moreover, one can imagine what it means for individuals who, with a biography that is already broken by flight and displacement, have to accept long detours to their actual goals due to seemingly insurmountable hurdles in the host country. Legal hurdles, seemingly impenetrable education systems, standardised support measures and de-skilling jobs are frustrating and unsettling.

We think, and would like to show this with our project-ImmPowerC (Strengthening the Potential of Immigrants through Effective and Relevant Coaching): in order to cope with the difficult task of finding a professional path in Europe, immigrants and especially refugees need competent and reliable, motivating and psychologically trained support.

We have therefore developed the course „Transcultural and Intercultural Coaching“ as part of an Erasmus project funded by the EU. This offer was taken up in particular by graduates of our coaching training, which has been established for decades. We would like to thank Bernhild Schrand, who was the main supervisor of the training, for bringing the idea to us.

What did our participants deal with?

The coaches, some of whom are self-employed and have been offering professional career coaching for a long time, or who work in institutions and provide counselling on a part-time basis, have spent several months intensively dealing with the life situation of immigrants and refugees. What does it mean to take this step in one's biography, or to have to take it, i.e. to leave one's job, family, social ties and cultural contexts and to completely reorient oneself in another country? What does it mean to deal with discrimination on a daily basis and to learn a new language as an adult? In parallel to the seminars, the participants of our course have worked with one or more clients, who were seeking advice. The coaches wrote about it and reflected on the coaching process. Many found this to be the most important part of the training.

We would like to share the approaches of our course with other providers of coaching training. We therefore strongly encourage educational institutions to get in touch with us so that we can share our experiences.

We carried out this project as part of a project partnership with the Federal Institute for Adult Education in Austria and with two counselling and educational institutions from Vienna. Our colleague Najwa Duzdar will say a few words herself in a moment about the Orientexpress Wien institution.

Since 1995, Integrationshaus Wien has been a shelter for traumatised refugees who want to build a new existence after their flight. The holistic professional implementation of accommodation, care, education and counselling for refugees and migrants under one roof is unique - a showcase model that is only available in this form at Integrationshaus, both nationally and internationally. It offers educational programmes for young people and women that prepare them very specifically for entering the labour market.

The different expertise in education and counselling that we were able to bring together in the project has been very useful for us as an institution. We would like to thank the colleagues who have contributed to such a productive collaboration.

I do not want to leave unmentioned one particular irony that accompanies our event: while the German government is presenting a skilled labour immigration law and thus dominating the political headlines these days, an Indian mechanical engineer who participated in our project has to leave the country because he could not present an employment contract.

He is a client in our project who has participated in coaching. A mechanical engineer from India who did a Master's degree in Germany, learned the German language, formed bonds here. While applying to companies, he worked as a yoga teacher after graduating. He actually wanted to report on his experiences here. Recently, his email reached us that his plans and life here in Germany were abruptly interrupted and he had to leave for India.

Our colleague from Orientexpress Vienna will tell in his place about the experiences and perspectives of coachees seeking advice.

I wish us a lively and constructive discussion today and now pass on to Maryam Mohammadi, who herself works as a coach and has been leading projects and advising refugees at the Lower Saxony Refugee Council for several years. She has also participated in our course and will mainly talk about the needs of refugee women.

Information on the training developed within the ImmPowerC project can be found on our website: [TIC-Webseite](#)

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