

Intercultural Challenges for the Reintegration of Displaced Professionals

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Refugee-professionals in Europe

Now well over four million refugees and asylum seekers in Europe (UNHCR, 2022).

A sub-group are **highly qualified professionals** who, having been displaced, often find themselves in low-skilled, minimum-wage jobs for which they are over-qualified (>100K?).

Little research done to date into highly-skilled refugees and their employability challenges.





The project

Critical Skills for Life and Work: Developing the Professional Intercultural Competence of Highly-Skilled Refugees cslw.eu

European Commission funded (2017-2019, ongoing), to enhance the employability and integration of refugee-professionals in three countries (the UK, the Netherlands and Austria), and then the rest of the EU (and beyond).

Strategic partnership composed of Newcastle University (UK), Universitaet Graz (Austria), Fryske Akademy (The Netherlands) and Action Foundation (UK) working with local agencies, organisations, local authorities and individual volunteers.



Project aims

The project focuses on the nature and development of 'professional intercultural communicative competence' (PICC) of
(a) highly-skilled refugees *and*
(b) the language teachers who work with them.

Production of language tools to develop PICC.

(Barrett et al, 2013; Byram, 1997; **CSLW, 2019**; Young & Sachdev, 2011)



Today's focus...

‘Success stories’ of former refugees who have re-entered the professional sphere:

- ▶ Part of needs analysis stage of the project
- ▶ Hear the ‘voices’ of refugee participants
- ▶ Draw some conclusions related to intercultural communicative competence, power asymmetries in research involving disadvantaged groups...

(Young et al, 2022)





‘Success stories’ of refugee professionals

- ▶ 15 ‘success stories’ (8 in Austria; 5 in the UK; 2 in Netherlands)
- ▶ Semi-structured interviews (in English, German or Dutch)
- ▶ Thematic content analysis of transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Aims

- To understand the contextualised trajectories of highly-skilled refugees who successfully re-entered a professional sphere of employment
- To explore their perspectives on what they feel **facilitated** or **inhibited** their successful development and so gain insights into their beliefs about what other highly skilled refugees would need to support their transition into professional roles

Findings: Hindering factors

- ▶ Financial constraints
- ▶ Problems with local bureaucracy and legislation
- ▶ Mental and physical health issues/ (post)trauma
- ▶ Host country main language proficiency
- ▶ Sense of isolation
- ▶ Discrimination
- ▶ Uncertainty and loss of control/agency

So, what helped...?

- ▶ Facilitating factors centred around the importance of accrual of, and support for, various CAPITALS (after Bourdieu, 1977)...

Psychological Capital

- ▶ PsyCap played a key role
- ▶ **Resilience** enabled participants to cope and recover from traumatic experiences in their host country and on their journey
- ▶ **Hope and optimism** helped them not to get discouraged by long waiting periods and slow process in official bureaucratic procedures
- ▶ **Self-efficacy and confidence** in their abilities enabled them to rationalise and/or dismiss unhelpful hostile encounters

- ▶ *In my mind I always believed in myself, I was concentrating on my degree, I was more focused on doing my degree. I don't know why but I always believed that I would have found a job through that route. That was my main goal... (Hanes, UK)*

Social Capital

- ▶ Two participants had an Austrian contact before coming to the country which helped them to get familiar with the language, culture, and authorities
- ▶ Connections made in language courses
- ▶ Volunteering helped make connections

- ▶ *I always have people who have been good to me, who say “You can walk this way, it is safe”. I have 5 such people, still today. One is a German teacher, [...], my boss, the social worker, [...] and I also have an English teacher [...].*
(Neylan, AT)

Linguistic Capital

- ▶ Participants' L1 helped them to connect with other students in the courses
- ▶ Multilingualism and existing intercultural communicative competence
- ▶ Overcoming L2 barrier and actively seeking opportunities to develop their linguistic resources
- ▶ *In my notebook I wrote down everything what I heard, to see what the difference is [...] because I heard so many idioms in dialect and German which have the same meaning in our language. [...]* (Jafar, AT)

Human Capital

- ▶ Another powerful drive for participants' successful integration into the host society and job market
- ▶ *Maybe this is something to do with your past life. So, when you worked in your home country or if you studied, or you were confident enough to, then you'll just do it in a foreign country, too. (Maali, AT)*

Some conclusions

- ▶ Capitals offer a useful lens to interpret reasons for success
- ▶ Single capitals interconnect to support agency
- ▶ Resilience and intercultural communicative competence are important enabling factors

Reflections and ongoing investigations

- The ‘sell’ for the project was to make displaced people employable/useful. What are/should employers be doing? And wider societies?
- Key differences between the experience of foreign language learning and IC encounters of refugees vs other groups of migrants and sojourners (e.g., students). ICC models tend to *assume* resources, access... Downplay the affective components.
- There should be a ‘good interculturalist’ on both sides of the researcher-researched nexus - ethical research recognising power asymmetries.
- Role of agency, self-motivation and resilience in participants’ accounts and ability to re-build their lives and careers...



How to promote/support resilience? (Mercer & Babic, 2019)

- ▶ Human capital
 - ▶ Training courses
 - ▶ Mentoring
 - ▶ Sourcing information
- ▶ Social capital
 - ▶ Creating networks
 - ▶ Joining communities of practice
 - ▶ Building and maintaining relationships
- ▶ Psychological capital
 - ▶ Promoting wellbeing
 - ▶ Developing optimistic explanatory style
 - ▶ Enhancing self-regulation strategies
- ▶ Physical capital
 - ▶ Maintaining physical health
 - ▶ Attending to sleep, nutrition and exercise
 - ▶ Prioritising self-care

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Thank you...!

- ▶ Your questions, comments...
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Critical Skills for Life and Work

Developing the Professional Intercultural Communicative Competence of Highly-Skilled Refugees

This is an **Erasmus+ funded project** which **aims** to design and implement effective training tools for enhancing key skills and competences of (a) highly-skilled refugees and (b) the language teachers who work with them, and so enhance the employability and societal integration of skilled refugees.

The **project focus** is on improving the achievement of this target group in key skills for professional intercultural communicative competence (PICC). For the teachers, the focus is on extending and developing their competences as educators by developing their abilities to teach PICC.

The **main output** of the project will be a toolkit comprised of two training modules:

- Professional intercultural communicative competence for work and life (for highly-skilled refugees)
- Teaching professional intercultural communicative competence (for volunteer teachers)

www.cslw.eu



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