

Multicultural diversity at work: The employment prospects of the asylum seekers in Slovenia

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The main goal of the European Commission's Community Initiative Programme Equal is to assure equal possibilities to deprived social groups at their entry in the labour market. The association Matafir,¹ was established two years ago at the Department for ethnology and cultural anthropology of University of Ljubljana and is one of the partners in this European project. The project plays an important role at development of human resources in a unique manner – by finding new methods against discrimination and inequality in the labour market and achieving welfare for all people, who live in Slovenia. The consortium tries to achieve equal conditions in the labour market for all asylum seekers. Assistance to the asylum seekers in this regard is a challenging project because the Asylum Act – adopted in Slovenia in 2006 – does not allow asylum seekers to obtain a work permit in the first year of waiting for the asylum. Only three asylum seekers have gained the work permit since the Act was adopted. The main goal of our programme is to prepare the asylum seekers to struggle efficiently with the bureaucratic and other barriers (such as language) in obtaining the refugee status.² One of the goals of the programme is rising of public awareness and challenging the prevailing stereotypes about the asylum seekers and refugees. The programme tries to raise the awareness of the general public and employers about the rights of the asylum seekers and refugees³ and to help them, by using different approaches, to enter the labour market. The strategy of informing the public and establishing the contacts with employers has been developed by Matafir association.

The integration of refugees in the new economic and social environment is extremely important and this is why our future goals should be aiming at the production of programmes that encourage multicultural diversity at work. In order to assess the interest of the Slovenian companies in cooperating in such programmes and their awareness of

¹ Matafir is a humanitarian organisation with its main focus on the unprivileged groups, mostly asylum seekers, refugees and other migrants.

² Status of refugee gives a person a right of permanent residence and equal rights as Slovene people about employment, education, social and medical care

³ According to the statistics of the Ministry of the Interior the number of registered refugees on May 31, 2007 was 119. Fifteen of them were employed, 50 unemployed, 19 retired, 10 of them pre-school children, 14 primary school pupils, 7 secondary school pupils and 4 students.

the asylum seekers' rights we conducted a survey. The analysis showed that there is still much to be done. However, most of the 40 included companies expressed preparedness to cooperate in the future.

The majority of the included companies (57%) employ less than 50 people, while the remaining 43% are big companies with more than 50 employees. The results of research showed that 85% of the big companies employ foreigners (also honorary and students), while the rate of employed foreigners in the small companies is only 30%. The analysis surprisingly showed that 90% of the interviewed companies are not aware of the work rights of the asylum seekers and refugees in Slovenia. This finding confirmed our assumption that there is still a lack of information among the companies. Only a small percentage (13%) of the asylum seekers' employment proposals was processed on the equal terms with other proposals. In 70% of the cases the companies would check their obligations to the foreigners first and then processed their applications on the equal terms. The remaining 17% of the companies, however, processed their application separately because they were unaware of the applicants' rights. They would seek for information at Employment Service of Slovenia, Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs and on the internet.

One of the central findings, however, gives prospects to optimism. Namely, 83% of the companies would be ready to accept qualified asylum seeker on one-month probation voluntarily⁴ work in their company, while 10% of them would accept also a non-qualified asylum seeker. The most cited reasons were about giving opportunities to all people to prove themselves and about getting additional help. All other companies, which were not in favour of this idea considered it a black market job. Only 20% of the included companies would be ready to cooperate in educational programmes on professional and social integration of the asylum seekers. All of those also expressed readiness for financial support of the asylum seekers during their involvement in the education.

The majority (80%) of the interviewed companies believe that all people who live in Slovenia legally (meaning having official work permits) should be employed under the same conditions as the Slovenian citizens. However, 70% of them also believe that Slovenians should have advantage over foreigner job seekers. The best illustration of the situation is a sentence from the George Orwell's *Animal Farm*: 'All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others'.

The message to the Slovenian public should be that diversity enables us to widen our horizons and to get to know the unknown. Unfortunately, diversity too often serves as the main reasons for intolerance and disharmony in the society. By giving the asylum seekers the ability to work, we also give them a chance to prove themselves and raise their self-esteem. Beside financial stimulation they can also gain an opportunity for new experiences and new acquaintances, which means that they are left with a better

⁴ In the future we would like to develop a model of voluntarily work for asylum seekers. This kind of work would be directed to acquire new experience, to get to know working environment and creating social network. Asylum seeker who would work would also have a mentor, whose task would be to present the working processes.

chance of becoming an active part of the society. The presented research is not passing representative cognitions, but can provide some insights and guidelines about how to work on this field in the future.

Education about professional and social integration can surely improve things on this field. Our aim is to create a net of companies, which would be prepared to help the asylum seekers in achieving better living conditions in Slovenia. It is currently impossible to employ the asylum seekers in this way because the Slovenian legislation prohibits it. The state approval would be required even for the project based on the voluntary work. Since multicultural society is becoming a part of our everyday life we have to find more efficient solutions for the incorporation of the asylum seekers and other immigrants into our society. This, however, includes joint effort of all institutions and the wider public who has to realise that a modern state can not function as an isolated but as an open space.