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## Addressing barriers to work for asylum seekers: Report from Switzerland

Kim Roos, Ines Wenger, Rahel Sowe and Yvonne Indermühle

Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW), Winterthur, Switzerland

### ABSTRACT

There are more displaced persons in the world than ever. Part of them arrive in Europe and ask for asylum status in Switzerland. The aim of this paper is to provide an insight in the current asylum process in Switzerland and its impact on the work situation of asylum seekers as an illustration of a meaningful occupation. The internet was searched for public statistics and reports about the asylum process in Switzerland. The main part of statistics and reports was available through the web site of the Swiss government. Asylum seekers in Switzerland have to wait between several months to two years until the asylum process is completed. During this time, a work permit is restricted. During the waiting time of the process and afterwards the likelihood of working in a low-income job is higher for asylum seekers compared to Swiss citizens. Furthermore, it usually takes more than two generations for an asylum seeker to reach the same work level as locals. Even though the welfare services offer some support for asylum seekers, statistics regarding work suggest that the integration into the Swiss labour market is still very difficult. Many factors hinder asylum seekers from integrating into the Swiss labour market. Swiss laws can create situations of occupational deprivation and a cut in occupational identity due to the non-acceptance of former professions and study degrees or work experience. In the current situation of Switzerland, the occupational therapy service is rarely involved in the process of work integration. The investigated statistics may show that occupational therapy could be a useful enrichment during the integration of asylum seekers into the labour market.

### KEYWORDS

Asylum process; asylum seeker; work; integration; Switzerland; occupational therapy

### Introduction

There are more displaced persons than ever in the world (UNHCR, 2018). Europe is an attractive destination to seek asylum, therefore refugees and the asylum procedures are a frequently discussed issue. In 2017 a total of 18,088 asylum requests were submitted in Switzerland. Of this number 57.5% were granted asylum or temporary admission with an extended asylum procedure (Secretary of State for Migration SEM [SEM], 2018). Asylum seekers in Switzerland have the right to a basic service, which includes access to health care, a place to live and money to cover basic needs such as food and clothes. Persons who receive asylum status or temporary admission, have the right and obligation to fulfil the process of integration which is defined as ‘accepting the values and laws of Switzerland, learning the language and taking part in working life’ (VIntA, 2007 Art. 4)

Work has been identified as a meaningful occupation for many persons and the International classification of Functioning, Disability and Health describes it as a major life area (World Health Organization, 2001, d840–d859). According to the Swiss law asylum seekers have the right and obligation to do so. With the example of work as an occupation and central factor of integration, this report aims to reflect about the current situation in Switzerland.

These circumstances seem to be ideal for supporting the performance of occupations. ‘Occupations refer to the everyday activities that people do as individuals, in families and with communities to occupy time and bring meaning and purpose to life. Occupations include things people need to, want to and are expected to do’ (WFOT, 2012, para. 2).

Asylum seekers in Switzerland are supported in their integration by offered language courses and job coaches help them to find work. Nevertheless, even with the good general support of the welfare service, asylum seekers face many problems in finding and maintaining work. Does the provision of basic services cover the needs of asylum seekers for a successful integration in the labour market, or is there a need for other interventions? The following report describes the current situation in Switzerland and discusses possible measures by occupational therapists to support the integration process of asylum seekers into the labour market.

### Method

Public statistics and reports about the asylum process in Switzerland were searched, mainly on websites of the Swiss government. The search addressed the following two questions:

**Table 1.** Keywords used for the systematic search.

Keyword category	English	German
Displaced person	Asylum seeker, refugee, migrant	Flüchtling, Asylbewerber
Work	Work, unemployment, labour, job, employment	Arbeit, Arbeitslosigkeit
Vocational integration	Work integration, supported employment, vocational rehabilitation	Berufliche Wiedereingliederung, berufliche Integration

- (a) How does the Swiss asylum process focusing on work look like?  
 (b) What is the current state of integration into the labour market under Swiss circumstances for asylum seekers?

The keywords are shown in Table 1 were used for searching the public statistics and reports in the internet.

## Results

The identified reports and public statistics showed that asylum seekers need to wait between several months to many years until the asylum process is completed (SEM, 2017). In each region of Switzerland, different laws regulate the possibilities of finding and carrying out work.

### How does the asylum process work in Switzerland?

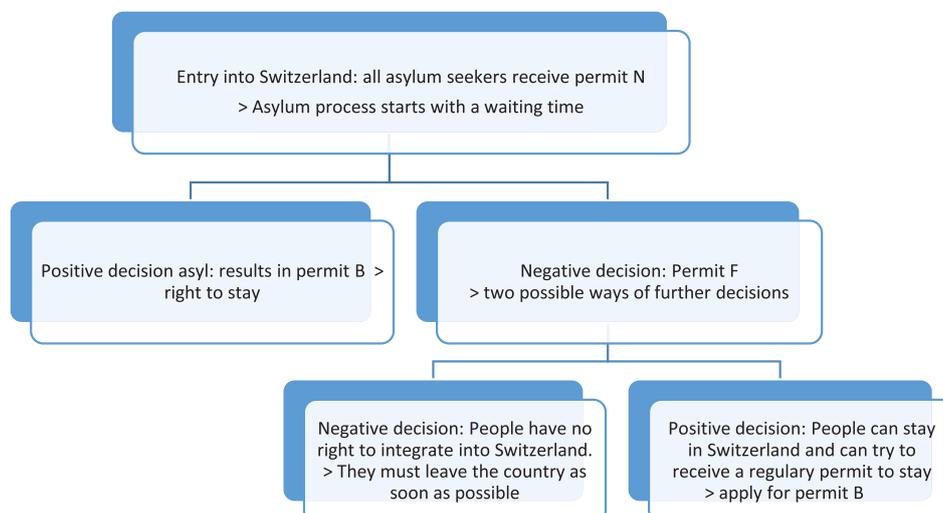
During the asylum process, different levels of permission regulate the stay of asylum seekers. Table 1 illustrates an overview of possible pathways.

The asylum process defines the different rights of asylum seekers in Switzerland and is connected to different levels of permits. Figure 1 shows an overview about the different permits. Attached to these rights is possible support from the welfare system and different regulations for work apply:

- People applying for asylum and whose application is being processed receive the **permit N**. While the

asylum process proceeds, they are basically entitled to be residents in Switzerland. However, persons with permit N do not have the right for gainful employment. After requesting asylum status there is a general work prohibition for the first three months. This prohibition can be extended for another three months if the application was rejected during the first three months. Under certain circumstances, they can be permitted to pursue gainful employment as an employee (SEM, 2017). After 6 months waiting period asylum seekers are allowed to work under certain conditions (SEM, 2017).

- Provisionally admitted foreigners (**permit F**) are persons who have been ordered to return from Switzerland to their native countries but in which cases the enforcement of this was either proved inadmissible (violation of international law), unreasonable (concrete endangerment of the foreign national) or impossible (for technical reasons of enforcement). The requirement for a work permit is a valid residence permit issued within the provisional admittance procedure (permit F). Therefore these persons do not have the right to work without a special work permit. The employer has to apply for a work permit for the particular work for the asylum seeker. Employment and change of employment by provisionally admitted asylum seekers with permit F are subject to permit regulations during the entire provisional admittance period.
- According to the Swiss Asylum Act and the Decree on admittance, residence and employment (1998), any employment and change of employment of asylum seekers with a **permit B** is subject to permit

**Figure 1.** Overview of the Swiss asylum process.

regulations as long as the applicant does not have a permanent residence permit.

- The sole object of the permit procedure is to ensure local salary and employment conditions.

### *What impact do Swiss conditions have on asylum seekers?*

In order to enable asylum seekers to fulfil the process of integration, everybody has the right to join language courses, receive vocational counselling in finding a work and access to education (Eidgenössische Migrationskommission 2017). The numbers of employed asylum seekers in employment are low. Only 26.4% of displaced persons with a permit F are working (Valda, 2015). Asylum seekers with a permit B or above are not recorded separately, they are included in the general migration statistics.

The searched public statistics provided the following information about the working situation of asylum seekers. Migrants in Switzerland are on average 1.6 times more likely to carry out low-income work. This situation continues until the second generation (Bundesamt für Statistik Sektion Demografie und Migration, n.d.). The risk of being poor in full-time employment is increased for 1.6% for people with an immigrant background compared to Swiss residents (Bundesamt für Statistik Sektion Demografie und Migration, n.d.). The unemployed rate is 2.6 times higher compared to the population of Swiss residents and this continues up to the second generation (Bundesamt für Statistik Sektion Demografie und Migration, n.d.). Barriers to entering the labour market are seen in poor language skills, different cultural habits, education and less job mobility caused by the Swiss laws (Spycher et al., 2006). Migrants in Switzerland have a higher risk of being overqualified for their current work (Bundesamt für Statistik Sektion Demografie und Migration, n.d.).

### **Discussion**

Switzerland has many aspects, which might support successful integration into the labour market. Welfare money is used to provide for all asylum seekers during the process like free language courses, access to education, counselling and support of finding work. Nevertheless, there are problems which might lead to the impression that some relevant aspects of integration into the labour market are overlooked. The statistics show that integration into the Swiss labour market is still very difficult for asylum seekers.

### *Regulations*

The whole asylum process takes a relatively long time and has many regulations for entering the labour

market. It could be hypothesised that asylum seekers in Switzerland often do not have a realistic chance to build up their future because the regulations are insurmountable barriers. Work permit regulations are various and difficult to understand – even more, difficult with a language barrier – so asylum seekers may not know what they might do to find work. Benelli, Mey, Trommsdorf, Villiger, and Seiterle (2014) emphasise in their study the negative influence of all these regulations for asylum seekers. Participants of Bellini's study express a feeling of powerlessness and a loss of perspectives caused by the restrictions to enter the labour market. Benelli et al. (2014) stated that asylum seekers enter the country with the idea of finding work quickly, but lose this hope during the asylum process.

Lindenmeyer, von Glutz, Häusler, and Kehl (2008) recommend an early integration which stands in contrast to the existing regulations. By being integrated in the labour market quickly, negative feelings are avoided. Huot, Kelly, and Park (2016) show that occupational deprivation is a frequently recognised phenomenon for asylum seekers. Occupational deprivation is defined as 'A state of preclusion from engagement in occupations of necessity and/or meaning due to factors that stand outside the immediate control of the individual' (Whiteford, 2000). Regulations such as those in the Swiss asylum process can be interpreted as a factor for occupational deprivation. Occupational therapy could offer a supported workplace which meets the regulations and rules but also gives the necessary experience and positive feelings that work provides. Few places in Switzerland as in other European countries are offering occupational therapy services like this (Boder, 2017). Assuming that a change in the existing regulations might be a long political process, occupational therapy could fill this gap and offer meaningful occupations. In many studies of occupational therapy and occupational science, asylum seekers express this problem and report the relief occupational therapy service can offer (Occupational Opportunities for Refugees and Asylum Seekers [OOFRAS], 2006). Individual job coaching from occupational therapists can support asylum seeker to adapt to cultural rules and accepted behaviour of the new country and therefore might support the integration into the labour market.

### *Continuum of occupational identity*

Diplomas from other countries are often not accepted, which can be a total cut for asylum seekers from their identity as professionals (Benelli et al., 2014). Statistics show that migrants are working more often in the low-income sector; the risk of being overqualified is higher

than for the average population. Benelli et al. (2014) recommend that asylum seekers should be asked about their former working experiences as well as ideas for their further career. This is in line with the holistic understanding of occupation (WFOT, 2012). Unruh (2004) describes in her paper the strong relationship between work and identity. It can be interpreted that it is necessary to take a holistic view of occupation into account for job counselling. In the current situation of Switzerland, occupational therapy service is not commonly part of the integration process for asylum seekers as in many other European countries. Nevertheless, occupational therapists could offer professional job coaching as described in some professional literature (Köhler, Steier-Mecklenburg, & Adam, 2011).

Supported by occupational therapy service, asylum seekers can strive more successfully to continue their occupational narrative in a meaningful way (Moore, 2017). This could be pursued with regard to their professional identity, too.

## Conclusion

The situation in Switzerland is positive for asylum seekers since these persons can benefit from a broad range of support in finding and maintaining work as well as gaining access to necessary education. Nevertheless, asylum seekers need more than just basic services for a successful integration into the labour market. Statistics of the current situation can be interpreted as showing that successful integration needs an assessment of work, which is defined as meaningful occupation. Occupational therapy can refer to the experience of supporting persons with other barriers into the labour market with a wide development of assessments and methods and practical experience for support. The goal of occupational therapy service would be to help asylum seekers overcome negative consequences of regulations and disruption of occupational identity, as we all know integration into a national labour market means more than just finding a job.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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