The Critical Skills for Life and Work (CSLW) project aims to design and implement effective training tools for enhancing key skills and competences of highly-skilled refugees and the language teachers who work with them, and so enhance the employability and societal integration of skilled refugees.

The main output of the project is a toolkit comprised of two training modules, one aimed at highly-skilled refugees and one at volunteer teachers.

The project is led by the Newcastle University (United Kingdom). Project partners are the Universität Graz (Austria), Fryske Akademy/Mercator (The Netherlands) and the refugee charity Action Foundation (United Kingdom).

The project team is currently disseminating the materials.

CSLW Multiplier Event in Graz

On Saturday 15th June 2019, the University of Graz team (Sarah Mercer, Sonja Babic, and Sandra Radinger) organized a one-day workshop to introduce and disseminate the toolkit to teachers, refugees, and other interested stakeholders in Austria. The workshop focused on the aspects of resilience and intercultural communication in the workplace from the toolkit. It was organized around a series of input sessions and interactive activities where participants had the opportunity to experience the materials and tasks from the toolkit themselves.

In particular, we began by reflecting on the empirical data underlying the design of the toolkit. This stemmed primarily from so-called ‘success stories’ which were interviews conducted across all three project settings with highly skilled refugees who had successfully found entry back into professional roles in the host country. A key theme in these data was the notion of resilience.

The Graz team made a YouTube video about the Critical Skills for Life and Work workshop. Interested? You can find the video here.
In the workshop, we discussed understandings of resilience and stressed its importance for success in the workplace. We clarified that it is malleable and dynamic, meaning anyone can develop this skill. Resilience can be trained through deliberate interventions and activities such as those included in the toolkit. Some examples included gratitude practices, silver linings activities, and mindset tasks. After lunch, we tried out a number of activities from Units 4 and 5 of the toolkit, including tasks on cultural sensitivity, critical thinking, cognitive biases, and collaboration.

It was a hugely successful day with much interest in the toolkit and its materials, as well as some fascinating discussions and the forming of many new friendships.

The Critical Skills for Life and Work Conference

The Critical Skills for Life and Work (CSLW) project conference took place on Friday 21st June 2019. The free one-day event was hosted by Newcastle University, in partnership with Action Foundation, the University of Graz and the Fryske Akademy.

Months of advertising paid off and the conference was attended by 100 people from both the UK and overseas. The audience was a mix of academics, refugee professionals, language teachers, as well as people working for refugee charities and other agencies. The conference gave attendees the opportunity to learn about the project and its outcomes, to take part in discussions with language teachers and researchers, and to learn about the lives of refugee professionals.

After some initial networking over morning coffee and a short welcome speech by project coordinator Dr. Tony Young, the first event of the day was the launch of a newly developed learner and teacher online toolkit. Dr Alina Schartner and Stefanie Schneider (Newcastle University) gave a project overview and demonstrated aspects of the toolkit - it is available as a free download in three languages (English, German, Dutch) on the project website.

The toolkit launch was followed by a series of talks by academics and researchers. First, Professor Steve Walsh (Newcastle University) spoke about ‘The place of materials co-production in evidence-based reflective practice’. Then, the Austrian project partners, Professor Sarah Mercer and Sonja Babic, gave a talk on ‘Resilience as psychological resource for highly skilled refugees’.

Cor van der Meer then spoke about the work of the Mercator European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning, before two Dutch language teachers, Laura Nap & Jacqueline Veldstra, gave the audience some insights into their work with refugees in the Netherlands.

After a busy morning, attendees networked over a well-deserved lunch in the Courtyard campus restaurant.
The afternoon began with a talk by Nicola Brooks of Action Foundation, who spoke about the work of the charity in supporting refugees in Newcastle. Dr. Sara Ganassin (Newcastle University) then introduced two refugee speakers whose ‘success stories’ were undoubtedly the highlight of the day. Sirak Berhe Hagos shared his journey from leaving Eritrea as a refugee to successful entrepreneur in Newcastle. Bahar Maryam Khesrawi, originally from Afghanistan, then spoke about her experiences of running her own women’s refugee charity in Leeds.

The speakers were then invited to take part in a round table discussion, giving the audience an opportunity to comment and ask questions. The talks were well received and the conference feedback was highly positive, with attendees highlighting in particular the excellent speakers and the friendly atmosphere.

The day concluded with a drinks reception, followed by dinner for the project team and speakers at a local Indian restaurant.

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Over the past two years, Critical Skills for Life and Work team members have given presentations about the project at a number of international events including conferences and symposia in New Zealand, China, Finland, Spain, and Italy.

On June 27th, CSLW project PI Dr Tony Young, was in Italy to give a talk at the EASP (European Association of Social Psychology) Meeting on Intergroup Communication. The Meeting was held at the Department of Psychology of the University of Bologna, and it was attended by European and international researchers whose field of work pertains to intergroup communication in an interdisciplinary framework. The talk Displacement and Professional Reintegration – ‘Success Stories’ from the European Refugee Crisis looked at intercultural and intergroup communication in the context of displacement.

On July 8th, Dr Sara Ganassin represented the CSLW team at the joint 11th IAIR (International Academy for Intercultural Research) Biennial Conference and the 15th CAFIC (China Association for Intercultural Communication) Annual Conference that took place at Shanghai International Studies University in China. Sara shared some insights from the project and presented the free project toolkit.

CSLW is now coming to an end, but the project team will continue to seek opportunities to share findings and conclusions from the project with both academic and non-academic audiences.

This was the third and last CSLW Newsletter...
For more updates on the project, please visit our website, Facebook or LinkedIn page