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Critical Skills for Life and Work training toolkit: Intercultural communication for refugee professionals

Module B: Professional intercultural communicative competence for work and life

Unit B1: Context and Background

This introductory unit offers an overview of this module and an introduction to the concept of professional intercultural communicative competence (PICC). Most learners will benefit from undertaking Unit 1 for orientation and contextual help, but more confident and/or experienced learners may be able to 'jump' straight into the core units.

Who is this module for?

This module is aimed at highly-skilled refugees and migrants (e.g., medical professionals, engineers, teachers, etc.) who are seeking to re-enter their professions. It was designed to support professionals who, having experienced displacement and migration, want to re-enter the job market in a position commensurate with their previous professional status and standing.

The module was developed as part of the Critical Skills for Life and Work project. It was co-constructed by refugees and migrants, and the language teachers who work with them, in partnership with academic researchers in Austria, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. It is, therefore, firmly grounded in the needs of both learners and teachers, and draws heavily on their experiences and ideas.

The overarching aim is to contribute to the social and professional integration of highly-skilled refugees and migrants by developing their professional intercultural communicative competence (PICC).

Why is this module needed?

Europe has recently experienced a dramatic and unprecedented influx of refugees and migrants. A small but significant 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. Their skill sets and professional experience often count for little, as host countries in an alarming number of cases fail to utilise the potential of much sought-after qualified personnel. The integration of these highly-skilled individuals into the labour market is crucial in order to avoid their long-term dependency and marginalization and to create a positive image in the eyes of the public.

> By the end of 2015, the EU as a whole received over 1.2 million first-time asylum claims (IOM, 2015).

Highly-skilled refugee and migrant professionals can make an invaluable contribution to host societies if given the chance to do so. They can also be part of the solution to challenges such as demographic ageing or lack of specific skills.

A number of initiatives are taking place across Europe to support the integration of refugees into their new countries, but highly-skilled refugees and migrants are a specific adult target group that is currently not well served by education providers.

What does this module offer?

This learner module is designed for learners to work through to develop their own Professional Intercultural Communicative Competence, and self study activities and materials in the four core units which are 2, 3, 4 and 5.

They are structured according to the aims of the unit and the aims of each activity, the rationale behind each activity, and instructions on completing the self study activities.

This module includes five parallel units (1) context & background, (2) finding a job, (3) applying for a job, (4) being interviewed and, (5) starting a job. Each unit contains a set of activities designed for self-study plus supplementary materials to extend learning in the thematic areas of the units. All activities relate to the development of PICC.

Units can be taken consecutively – the structure of units 2, 3, 4 and 5 is designed to facilitate this – but can also be taken in any order; the units are self-standing to allow learners to choose units and activities depending on their own specific needs and circumstances. Activities within in each unit can be taken in the order presented, but not all activities need to be undertaken, and their order is interchangeable. Overall, we recommend learners to choose and use units and resources according to their context, needs and circumstances.

Most activities in the module are in English (chosen for pragmatic reasons as a language shared by many professionals) but are written in a way that facilitates and encourages adaptation in and translation to different languages.

From a linguistic perspective, the toolkit is built around the assumption that refugee and migrant professionals will have some linguistic capital. The primary aim of the module is to develop PICC, as opposed to linguistic proficiency in any specific 'target language'. Using all their plurilingual resources, learners might engage with input in one language and generate meaning in contextually appropriate ways.

Note: This module does not offer facts and figures about refugees in Europe. It does not offer legal advice, but a list of organisations that can support learners and teachers is provided at the end of this unit (B1). The toolkit does not provide advice on all specific professional pathways, but gives localisable examples of how this might be done in some professional contexts where many refugees seek re-admission.

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The CSLW project partnership was made up of: **Newcastle University** (UK), which was responsible for coordinating the project; **Universität Graz** (Austria); **Fryske Akademy** (The Netherlands); and **Action Foundation** (UK).

Visit the project website: http://www.cslw.eu/

The Critical Skills for Life and Work (CSLW) Project

This module was developed as part of a two-year Erasmus + development of innovation project (2017-2019): Critical Skills for Life and Work Project: Developing the Professional Intercultural Communicative Competence of Highly-Skilled Refugees.

The project involved four partner organisations working across three national contexts: Austria, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

The project objectives were:

(a) To identify and articulate the profession-relevant communicative, interactional and intercultural needs of highly-skilled refugees, which would enable them to find employment in a professional domain for which they are qualified;

(b) To identify and articulate the training and skill-development needs of teachers, educators, and other professionals working with highly skilled refugees;

(c) To produce communication, interactional and professional-oriented intercultural competence-focused teaching and learning materials for refugees and language educators.

LANGUAGE FOR MOBILITY

The module is aimed at enhancing 'language for mobility' skills. These will enable learners to mediate meaning between their primary cultures, the cultures of the workplace and the prevailing cultures in their host country, or any future place of settlement.

The materials were collected into a toolkit consisting of two modules (see Figure 1), one for teachers and one for learners:

Module A: Teaching professional intercultural communicative competence

Module B: Professional intercultural communicative competence for work and life

The toolkit was developed as part of a two-phased collaborative process. The

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four project partners worked with a number of highly-skilled refugees and migrants, and with teachers across three locations to co-create a set of resources that can be useful in a diversity of European contexts.
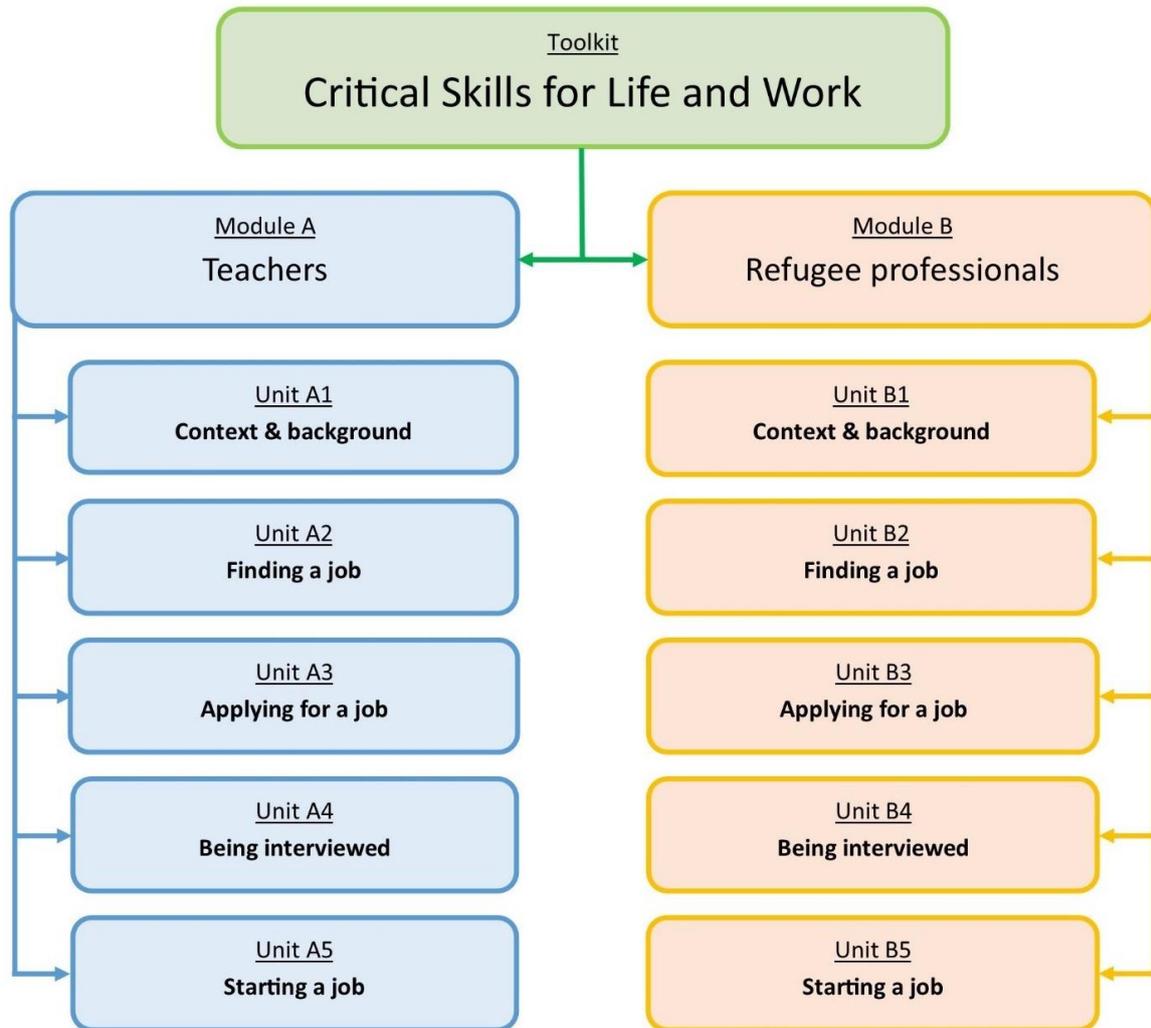
In the first phase, project members in the three national locations looked closely at the lives and experiences of people who had successfully made the transition from refugee status back into the professional sphere. This was done through ethnographic interviews which sought to discover exactly how these people had made the transition, what had helped them, what had hindered them, and what they could pass on to others like them by way of advice. Additionally, focus groups were held with learners and teachers in the different locations, to gauge current provision and their needs in relation to developing PICC.

In the second phase, project members worked with local refugees and teachers to develop learning and teaching materials. These were then piloted by different target groups including networks of agencies working with skilled refugees, teaching organisations such as colleges of further and higher education, national and international professional accreditation agencies, and relevant employers and employment agencies. The aim was to create a model which can be extended to other contexts. The materials were fine-tuned according to the feedback provided by teachers and learners.

PROJECT PHASES

Phase 1:
'Success stories' interviews with refugee professionals
Focus groups with learners and teachers

Phase 2:
Co-production of learner and teacher materials

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Toolkit
Critical Skills for Life and Work

Module A
Teachers

Module B
Refugee professionals

Unit A1
Context & background

Unit A2
Finding a job

Unit A3
Applying for a job

Unit A4
Being interviewed

Unit A5
Starting a job

Unit B1
Context & background

Unit B2
Finding a job

Unit B3
Applying for a job

Unit B4
Being interviewed

Unit B5
Starting a job

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Understanding professional intercultural communicative competence

A key element of professional competence in any workplace setting is the ability to communicate clearly and interact with colleagues on a number of levels and in a range of contexts. Effective communication rests on an ability to interact with others and to collectively reach understandings. It is apparent when studying spoken interaction that different speakers have different levels of communicative competence and varying abilities to express their ideas and achieve understanding. This is true in any setting, but particularly so in the workplace, where competing agendas, priorities, deadlines, a mix of personalities, and so on may create difficulties and result in tensions. This is especially the case in professional settings involving people from a range of social, educational and cultural backgrounds.

Some form of Professional Intercultural Communicative Competence (PICC), then, is needed in order to 'survive' most communicative encounters where 'cultural difference' is present in some way.

PICC

Professional intercultural communicative competence (PICC) refers to key intercultural communicative skills, knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, and critical cultural awareness related to the process of successfully entering the professional sphere after a period of forced displacement.

Being accurate or fluent in a language is, arguably, insufficient. Speakers must be able to do far more than produce correct strings of utterances. They need to be able to pay attention to the professional context, to listen and show that they have understood, to clarify meanings, to repair breakdowns and so on. All of this requires extreme mental and interactional ability, the kind of ability, which will not be trained by taking part in typical language classrooms. Additional skills, related to professional interactional and intercultural competence, are required.

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

'The appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioural orientations to the world' (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009, p. 7)

The materials in this module are strongly informed by intercultural communication theory, in particular by the concepts of intercultural and interactional competence. They are also informed by recent research on teacher education, professional communication, continuing professional development (CPD) and best practice in language education.

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Over the past 25 years, a number of models of intercultural competence have been developed. This toolkit has been inspired by the Intercultural Communicative Competence Model (ICC), developed by Michael Byram (1997). Byram challenges native speaker models of language learning where learners are judged by native speaker standards. Instead, he emphasises the importance of engaging, through a foreign language, in intercultural communication and interaction with interlocutors with different culturally influenced values, beliefs, and assumptions. He calls this the 'intercultural speaker'.

Here, we extend the concept of intercultural speaker to professional contexts, with particular interest for the experiences of highly-skilled

THE INTERCULTURAL SPEAKER

'… to act as mediator between people of different origins and identities. It is this function of establishing relationships, managing dysfunctions and mediating which distinguishes an 'intercultural speaker', and makes them different from a native speaker.'

(Byram, 1997: 38)

refugees and migrants in Europe and of professionals working with them. In defining professional intercultural communicative competence, we focus on professional communication between people who are members of different groups, with an emphasis on people in social interaction with each other (Scollon & Scollon, 2001).

The materials in this module are informed by five factors in intercultural communication, which Byram calls *savoirs:*

- *Savoir être* (intercultural attitudes): the ability to see the world from the perspective of an outsider who might have a different set of values and beliefs.

- *Savoirs* (knowledge): not primarily knowledge about a specific culture, but rather knowledge of how social groups and identities function and what is involved. It focuses on social groups in one's own culture as well on social groups in other cultures and on general interaction processes.

- *Savoir comprendre* (skills of interpreting and relating): the ability to interpret symbols and events of other cultures and to relate such interpretation to one's own culture and experience. It points up the importance for learners to acquire the skills of finding out new knowledge and integrating it with knowledge(s) they already have.

- *Savoir apprendre/faire* (skills of discovery and interaction): the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills in real-time communication and interaction.

- *Savoir s'engager* (critical cultural awareness): the ability to interpret, evaluate and negotiate perspectives, practices, and products in one's own and others' cultures. It highlights the importance for teachers not to try to change learners' values, but to develop their awareness of how such values might influence their interactions with others.

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Reflective exercises for you

The materials in this module and toolkit were developed based on a number of interviews from the three countries of the research, all with highly-skilled refugees like you who have successfully reintegrated into the workplace. We were inspired by their stories and we hope you will be too.

Below is Ameera's true story. We have changed names and identifying markers to protect her identity. Read the first part of her story and think about the questions below before continuing to see how her story continues.

Ameera's story – part 1

Ameera is a 40-year-old teacher and translator from Afghanistan. She moved to the UK 9 years ago. In her country, she completed a degree in English language and literature and worked as a language teacher and translator. A multilingual speaker, Ameera speaks Arabic, Dari and Turkish to varying degrees. In Afghanistan, she could confidently read in and translate from English, but she never had the opportunity to practice her language skills in 'real life' situations and she knew little about life in Europe.

Her English improved after a short work experience in Germany, the only country that she visited before leaving Afghanistan. However, as soon as she arrived in the UK, Ameera realised that, if she wanted to re-enter her profession and to get integrated, she needed to communicate with people.

Feeling lonely and wanting to create a social network, Ameera started to volunteer for a number of local charities supporting other refugees. She also worked as an interpreter for the NHS (the British national health system). She was very excited when she found a job in a local shop as she could improve her English and work in the service sector. At the same time, she wanted to study for a further qualification, and she started to pursue a number of training different courses (IT, photography) at different levels, although she wasn't able to study what she really wanted at university.

- Are there any similarities between you and Ameera in in your professional lives in your own counties? And in your new host countries?

- How do you think Aleena feels at this point in the story? Is this how you feel about your story, up to now?

- In your opinion, what language skills did Ameera need to develop? What is she doing already (in this part of the story), and what else could she do?

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- How is Ameera developing her intercultural knowledge and skills? What else could she do to pursue her goals?

Ameera's story – part 2

Ameena is now working as a translator, and as an Arabic language teacher at a local university, as well as undertaking a PhD. Three years after her arrival in the UK, Ameera obtained a bursary to complete an MA at university. Whilst juggling work and studies, she successfully applied for an Arabic language teacher job at a local university. She left her job as shop assistant to focus on teaching. Having more time, she was also able to join a creative writing group and to pursue her passion for poetry and storytelling.

After a number of failed attempts to apply for funding, three years ago she obtained a bursary to undertake a PhD. Supported by university colleagues, she also managed to re-enter her profession as a translator, and she currently collaborates with two major UK-based publishing houses.

Ameera has recently published a book of short stories inspired by her journey and is looking forward to her new career as a writer.

This is the advice that Ameera would share with others in a similar situation: 'Find something and go for that. Have a goal. Often we take things for granted but we should not. There are only two ways: one is to live, and one is to give up, and to live we need to find something to fight for. I don't know if I have been successful but if my story can help even one person, then I am happy'

- How do you think Ameera's experiences in part 1 helped her to achieve her goals? Think about her intercultural/communication skills.

- It took Ameera three years to start her masters, and then another three years to start her PhD. List the things Ameera did to help herself in this 'waiting time' – is there anything similar which could help you in the same way?

- How do you think Ameena feels about the waiting time, and about her life now?

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Further resources for learners

European Commission Erasmus+ Online Linguistic Support (OLS) for refugees: https://erasmusplusols.eu/en/ols-for-refugees/

Council of Europe Language Support for Adult Refugees toolkit (designed to assist organisations, and especially volunteers, providing language support for adult refugees): www.coe.int/lang-refugees

RefuAid support access to language tuition, education, finance and meaningful employment: https://refuaid.org/

'Deutsch am Arbeitsplatz' (German at work) – free online resources on professional workplace communication for learners in German-speaking countries: https://www.goethe.de/de/spr/ueb/daa.html

'Austria materials' developed by the Integrationsfonds. Available for learners and teachers to learn/teach about Austria from different perspectives: https://sprachportal.integrationsfonds.at/english/learning-german/free-materials-to-download/austria-materials

Free smartphone Apps for download for learners in German-speaking countries:

- 'Unterwegs Deutsch lernen' Deutschtrainer A1 App – vocabulary app for learners of German: https://www.goethe.de/de/spr/ueb/dt1.html
- 'Stadt der Woerter' - language learning games app for learners of German: https://www.goethe.de/de/spr/ueb/led.html

Information for refugee health professionals in the UK: https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/what_we_do/refugee_services/refugees_into_jobs/refugee_health_professionals

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