Guidelines for Counsellors

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Purpose of these Guidelines

All over Europe, there is widespread need to detect and react properly to basic skills deficiencies shown by clients during early stages of social, vocational or educational counselling. Since practically all people who are affected by reading and writing problems hide their deficits due to a feeling of shame and embarrassment, advisers working in these fields need to be trained to employ strategies and methods to carefully unveil these facts without offending the social and cultural integritiy of their clients.

"I've brought my father. He always does this sort of thing for me."

These "Guidelines for Counselling Disadvantaged Adults" will therefore sensitize and inform advisers working in several areas about different aspects and phenomena of illiteracy or borderline basic skills (a definition of the widely used term "functional illiteracy" will be given below) and, above all, the sociological and cultural background of people affected by it. In this way their knowledge about and awareness of different aspects of "functional illiteracy" shall be increased.

Insights into the Life Situations of Functional Illiterates

"Well, I'm generally not good at forms."

Detailed information on the backgrounds of "functional illiterates" will comprise aspects of education, profession, factors causing and accompanying reading and writing deficits and common psychological problems resulting from illiteracy. There will also be focus on specific differences and similarities between several social groups affected by basic skills deficits (e.g. juveniles, women, migrants), as well as on general current characteristics and trends of functional illiteracy as a social phenomenon.

"I'm not interested in any details. Where shall I sign?”

Focus on Hiding and Avoidance Strategies

There will also be particular emphasis on describing the nature of various hiding and avoidance strategies employed by affected people, in order to inform and prepare frontline staff providing guidance and counselling in regard to detection of functional illiteracy.

How to Deal with the Target Group

In addition to this, these guidelines will also focus on questions of how to deal with such clients in concrete "outing" situations and suggest some ways of possible reaction. This will include elements such as how they can help their clients to reflect on their specific situation, abandon avoidance strategies, develop necessary self-confidence and agree on a new start. Finally, this document will offer ways of assisting clients with going through respective training programmes, maintaining their motivation and providing methods for escort during and after the period of training.

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Definition of basic skills and functional Illiteracy

Basic Skills

The generally accepted definition of "basic skills" knowledge is as follows:

The ability to read and write (literacy), as well as to speak a respective language, and to use mathematics (numeracy) at a level necessary to function at work and in society in general.

“I'll have to ask my wife about this before I fill it in."

Functional Illiteracy

A person is functionally illiterate who cannot engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective function of his or her group and community and also for enabling him or her to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his or her own and the community's development.
(according to a definition by the UNESCO)

“Can I take this away and bring it back next time?"

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