

Interview with EASO judicial trainers - delivering online training in the EASO professional development webinar series

The Courts and Tribunals Sector of EASO organises professional development workshops for members of courts and tribunals of EU+ Member States that aim to advance their expertise in the field of international protection. Such workshops are led by EASO judicial trainers that are members of courts and tribunals themselves.

Responding both to the pandemic and a request for virtual training from its Network, the Courts and Tribunals Sector has recently introduced a new online professional development activity, known as Professional Development Webinar Series. This is a series of online training sessions that bring together approximately 20 participants from different Member States who, with the help of two EASO judicial trainers, discuss case studies, exchange experience and participate in interactive exercises that will enhance their knowledge on international protection law.

Professional Development Webinar Series have already taken place on the topics of Country of Origin Information, Evidence and Credibility Assessment, Asylum Procedures and Detention. Let us hear from judge, Barbara Simma and deputy chairperson of Ireland's International Protection Appeals Tribunal, John Stanley on their experience as EASO judicial trainers and more specifically on delivering online training in the EASO professional development webinar series!

Can you present yourself and explain your role as a judge specialised in the field of international protection?



Barbara Simma: I was appointed an administrative judge at a first instance tribunal in Austria - the Bundesverwaltungsgericht - in 2014. In that role I adjudicate - among other legal subject matters - complaints against decisions of the Austrian Asylum Authority in proceedings concerning international protection.

John Stanley: I am a deputy chairperson and member of Ireland's International Protection Appeals Tribunal. As a member of Ireland's Tribunal, I hear appeals on many aspects of international protection, including in respect of refusal of international protection, inadmissibility, refusal of consent to make a subsequent application, and transfer of applicants to another member state under the Dublin regulation.

As a deputy chairperson, the chairperson of the tribunal can assign to me any of her functions. Broadly, those functions have to do with ensuring efficiency and fairness, and avoiding undue divergence, in decision making. In particular, I oversee the tribunal's system for monitoring and improving the quality of its decision making.



Could you share some information about your role and tasks as an EASO judicial trainer? When did you start? Why did you decide to apply to the EASO Judicial Trainers' Pool?

Barbara Simma: I was lucky and happy to be part of the team of judges that worked on the Judicial Practical Guide on Country of Origin Information in 2017. When afterwards there came a call for expression of interest in delivering training workshops also on this topic I felt invested and well prepared to put my name down. Since this moment, I have been a judicial co-trainer in two face-to-face trainings, one in Sofia in 2018 and one in Athens in 2019, and in one webinar on COI in June 2020. As judicial co-trainers we at first discuss the content and the agenda of a training, often referring to already existing material that we could use as a starting point. We then think how to best present the different chapters of the content, while using case studies and moot court examples. However, I must also mention the invaluable assistance from EASO in preparing the training workshops by providing material, supporting with any technical issues, proposing tools to engage the audience, etc. I recall the first webinar I had to organise where the input from EASO on possibilities to ease the lecture format and encourage discussion on the platform was very important.

John Stanley: My first task as an EASO judicial trainer was to provide training on qualification for international protection in Valletta in March 2020. The training took place when Covid-19 was on the cusp of its worldwide spread (the WHO declared Covid-19 a pandemic on 11 March), and my co-trainer, and some of the attendees, could not travel to Malta for the training because of the growing concerns about the virus. Later, I remembered everyone shaking hands when we gave out the certificates at the end of the training, and realised it would be a while before that would happen again.

Before I joined the trainers' pool I had attended EASO training in Valletta several times, and I found its content excellent, and its style very appealing. Moreover, I learned much all the others being trained. As I'm focussed on ensuring ever better quality of decision making in Ireland's Tribunal, I had a particular use at home for the experience I might get as a trainer.

It seems to me that learning, and being both student and teacher, are life-long activities, and

that attending EASO training, and being an EASO judicial trainer, are excellent ways for an asylum law decision maker to engage in these pursuits.

What did you learn from the experience of being an EASO judicial trainer while preparing and delivering workshops for fellow members of courts and tribunals?



Barbara Simma: Preparing and holding this type of training workshop provides a platform for engaging with colleagues from all over Europe. It allows us to exchange knowledge and different practices, as well as to learn about the problem areas European judges are currently battling with. Since the goal is always to provide practical and useful information, as a trainer you are required to understand the participants' needs, interests and expectations. This defines how and what you prepare. Ideally, both trainers and

participants alike leave the workshop all the richer for the experience.

John Stanley: I could write a long list of things learned from being an EASO trainer. I'll just mention what occur to me as the top three things. First, thorough preparation of all material, including in respect of the material that a co-presenter is due to present, makes a huge difference. Good preparation allows the trainer to be flexible with the material so he or she can adapt it to the particular needs and interests of the attendees (and present a co-presenter's material, if a co-presenter cannot attend due to Covid-19!). Secondly, each group attending training is different, with its variety of expertise and perspectives, and its particular dynamic. Being alive to this, and allowing the training to mould itself accordingly, makes training more effective and fun. Thirdly, when addressing people from a variety of member states, native English speakers, especially if they are Irish with too much to say, must speak slowly and clearly!

You were one of two judicial trainers to deliver the first online workshop in June 2020. How did this impact your role, and what challenges did you face?

Barbara Simma: I was very proud to be part of the first webinar this year together with a colleague from Finland. Challenges, as is usually the case, included getting familiar with the technical aspects of an online workshop. This included understanding the platform and how to understand what can be done through this online means and in which ways. Further, we really thought about how to make the content more understandable and relatable via the online format. I am very grateful to EASO about being adamant on the fact that we needed to create tools to try and engage the participants as much as possible. For example, asking them questions via polls or quizzes. I found it to be the biggest challenge to create an environment and occasions to initiate and facilitate active participation by everyone. Overall, it was a fascinating project that we could not have developed in the same way without the support and help from EASO.

John Stanley: When I signed up for the trainers' pool, I envisaged regular jaunts to Valletta, not my kitchen. Nonetheless, delivering the first online workshop was fascinating. As you can

imagine, the challenges of adapting to online training (at least for me, having not done this often before) were numerous. I think an important challenge is in finding ways to allow participants to talk together, not only so that between presentations they can swap ideas and experiences, but also so that in teasing out things together they can give themselves the confidence to talk and ask questions during the presentations. EASO coffee breaks, lunches, and group suppers are much missed! I'm sure as we get more comfortable with online training we will find creative ways to do address this.

In preparing for the online training, my co-presenter, Marie-Cécile Zys, and I met with Eleni and Nicholas from EASO each of the four or so weeks leading up to the training, to satisfy ourselves that the preparation was going according to plan. Our new online environment may have prompted this approach, but it seems to me an excellent one that minimises the possibility of things going wrong, and that all future training would benefit from.

Would you recommend to other judges to become an EASO judicial trainer? In your view, what are the essential qualities a judicial trainer must possess?

Barbara Simma: Absolutely. Being an EASO judicial trainer is beneficial on so many levels. It is a great way to impart some of one's own experience and knowledge, as well as an opportunity to meet colleagues from all over Europe. This helps to further one's knowledge of the subject matter as well as to hone and develop communication skills (and in English, too!). In short, it was a very valuable experience that gave me at least as much back as I put in to the workshops as a co-trainer. And essential qualities are – apart from the obvious, some knowledge on the subject matter – a pinch of curiosity, no hesitation to try things out and a willingness to engage and to support others to engage.

John Stanley: I would. I think being a judicial trainer enriches one's work as a judge or tribunal member. It prompts clear thinking, and to be clear on the justification for a point of view (or to question it). It allows a decision maker to benefit from the experiences and perspectives of those from other legal traditions. Some important qualities for an EASO judicial trainer seem to me include curiosity and openness to learning, an interest in finding practical solutions to problems faced by judges, and appreciation and enjoyment of cooperation. Of course, having good experience and knowledge of asylum law is important too, though I think that it's more important again for the trainer to be aware of the limits of that knowledge, and to be agile with it.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Barbara Simma: No, except thank you!

John Stanley: Just to say thank you to Basia, Eleni, Isidoros, Paul, Nicolas, and all at EASO for being such good colleagues, and providing great support, both to me as a trainer, and to all of us who benefit from the work of EASO in our decision making every day.

For more information about EASO's support to Courts and Tribunals you can visit EASO's Website here:

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