

Labour Lost

Refugees and employment: the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers with permission to work, of looking for jobs in England's Northwest

*Report produced on behalf of the Northwest Regional Development Agency
by Refugee Action and Lancaster University*

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Glossary

BMA	British Medical Association
DWP	Department of Work and Pensions
EEA	European Economic Area
ELR	Exceptional Leave to Remain
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
GMC	General Medical Council
ILM	Intermediate Labour Market
JSA	Job Seekers Allowance
LA	Local Authority
NASS	National Asylum Support Service
NHS	National Health Service
NIACE	National Institute of Adult Continuing Education
NINO	National Insurance Number
NRIF	National Refugee Integration Forum
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
NWDA	Northwest Regional Development Agency
PGCE	Post Graduate Certificate in Education
RCN	Royal College of Nursing

1 Executive summary

This study was carried out during 2003, funded by Northwest Regional Development Agency and commissioned by Refugee Action. Researchers interviewed 41 refugees and asylum seekers with permission to work, individually (16 women and 25 men). In addition four focus groups were conducted, with a view to identifying the problems they face and their successes in finding jobs in England's Northwest. Altogether 80 people participated in the study.

The aims of the research

"To explore the barriers to the employment of refugees in England's Northwest and propose the most effective ways of overcoming them. The research will focus on a high quality, in depth, exploration of the employment related experience of refugees and refugee communities, on the barriers that they have experienced and on the strategies that they have developed to overcome them. It will also look at their experience of employment related services, the perception of them within refugee communities and the services that refugees feel would help them to make the step into employment."

The NWDA strategy for England's Northwest

The Northwest Regional Development Agency has a vision for the Northwest for the next 20 years that will develop the economy in the region, and will in partnership with business, attract skilled people to work there. As part of this, the NWDA aims to secure economic inclusion and develop and maintain a healthy labour market through business development, regeneration and developing skills and employment. All these goals are relevant to refugees and asylum seekers, many of who live in the worst 20% of wards in the Index of Multiple Deprivation.

The existing research

The statistics suggest that somewhere between 36 and 80 % of refugees are unemployed. Studies available are largely statistical, but most agree that the main obstacles to work are lack of English language skills, psychological problems, lack of information, cultural barriers, long-term unemployment, no UK experience, lack of awareness of the job market, lack of references, trouble getting NI number, unclear documentation, gender, paperwork, status, confusion and reluctance amongst employers, financial difficulties, lack of appropriate training, unavailability of courses, racism and prejudice, lack of recognition of overseas qualifications, and lack of childcare facilities.

The findings

- **Many asylum seekers arrive in the UK with both psychological and physical trauma. Their health is also affected by their experiences in the job market.** As with other groups, **joblessness leads to further deterioration in well-being**, and this may be exacerbated by racism and lack of support, poverty and poor housing. **They need help to be put in place quickly and appropriately**, if they are to be assisted to contribute their labour and skills to a country where there are labour shortages in key areas.
- **Everyone in the study had worked before they came to the UK** (unless they were too young to work), and we met no one who was not willing to look for a job. However since they came here some have been long term unemployed and have experienced the loss of confidence and skills that results. Some young men with a trade in their country of origin were working in unskilled jobs in factories.
- **The most likely place to find work was through contacts in their own communities**, through friends already in work, **or through advice given by refugee advice agencies**. Specialised help of this sort seemed to be more successful than through formal state sponsored organisations.

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- Significant numbers of people interviewed had **qualifications from their countries of origin**, but had difficulties **related to the acceptability/transferability of their qualifications**. Many of them had skills in demand in the British economy, but where there existed provision for transferability, these were often costly and prolonged. Other common problems that participants experienced were the level of English required, to what extent their overseas experience was valued, their lack of UK experience and evidence of their qualifications. Some were in jobs unrelated to their training, some had embarked in training in other fields.
 - **Information, advice and guidance services are not well known or frequently accessed**. Job Centres were not popular with interviewees, being unsympathetic, cumbersome, impersonal and directing refugees to courses or to jobs in restaurants, manual or other unskilled work regardless of background, qualification or experience. Staff were criticised as having little knowledge of the needs of asylum seekers and therefore making inappropriate responses. Some private employment agencies are seen to offer a personal, welcoming and successful service. Where Job Centre Plus staff and refugee advice or link workers liaised, there were examples of practice that was well regarded but this was infrequent.
 - **Opinions varied about volunteering as a route into employment**. Its advantages are as a way of practising English, a source of references, a social outlet, a means to gain information about jobs and local resources, a way of contributing to the community. Disadvantages are that it is perceived as no substitute for a decent income, a waste of time, and there may be a risk of getting stuck in voluntary rather than paid work. Some people were carrying out voluntary work to the extent that it could be argued that they were being exploited. Cultural perceptions of work without pay varied amongst the refugees, and some who said they would not do voluntary work, were in fact doing unpaid work within their own communities. There were a number of barriers that did not facilitate a quick and smooth process into work. This risked damaging confidence, and a loss of those skills needed by the economy.
 - **English language as an obstacle to work** did not consist simply in not having knowledge of English, **but had a number of dimensions**. These included having learned English in the country of origin, and needing only practice in dealing with local accents; the very high level of English required for some jobs; the fact that people with good English still have trouble finding jobs. Questions were raised about whether potential employers use this reason as a cover for racism. Not all available courses were flexible enough to respond to the particular needs of refugees.
 - In particular communities, groups of **young men face particular prejudices in looking for work**, sometimes within their own communities. They are largely young people who came to this country as children, suffered deprivation in terms of housing and education, and left school without qualifications. They face all of the risks associated with long-term social and economic exclusion. They feel they are stereotyped as undesirable employees and since 9/11, as potential terrorists. Some are convinced that employers prefer young (white) English people to fill vacancies.
 - **Some people have been successful in finding jobs they are happy with**. These are mainly unskilled people who came to the UK without high expectations of the kinds of work they might find. **Professionally qualified people had much more difficulty in acquiring suitable work**. However a few of these had started at the bottom of the ladder, and had been willing to take whatever was available in the slow journey towards satisfactory work. This could take a number of years, and meanwhile their original skills were lost to the economy.
 - **Some people had been forced into illegal working** because their English was not good enough for jobs in the mainstream job market or because of other problems. Some of them were paid very low wages for this, their illegal status making them vulnerable to unscrupulous employers, finding themselves exploited through working long hours for less than the minimum wage.
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- **Acquiring jobs is hampered by demands from employers** for certification such as NVQs or Access certificates, for references, for UK experience, and the need to produce proof of address and a criminal records check, and have a bank account. Some potential employers may be wary of employing refugees and asylum seekers because they do not know the rules on working, or think refugees will be moved on, or that they constitute trouble of some description.
 - **Women face particular problems when seeking work**, especially where there is not an extended family to help out. These included availability and cost of childcare, caring and domestic responsibilities, ill-health, cultural restrictions on some women in working alongside men; and inexperience of some women in dealing with bureaucracy. **Older people face discrimination in the job market.** Some with qualifications from their countries of origin are not allowed to work in their field, and feel too old to re-train.

2 Introduction

The UK has an obligation under the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol Convention, to grant refuge in the UK on humanitarian grounds to those with a 'well-founded fear of persecution'. According to government figures, of 85,865 applications received in 2002, 34% were granted asylum or Exceptional Leave to Remain (ELR – abolished from April 2003) and 66% were refused (Home Office, 2003). The Refugee Council estimates that there are 260,000 refugees and asylum seekers in the UK currently (Shiferaw and Hagos, 2002). Refugee Action estimates that there are approximately 35,000 refugees and asylum seekers in the Northwest.

Refugees and asylum seekers are generally regarded as indistinguishable, and the two terms are often collapsed into the single, derogatory label of 'asylum seekers' (though it is true that both are concerned to receive refuge in the country to which they have come). Officially, when a person makes an application for asylum, s/he becomes an asylum seeker. The Home Office considers the application. If a decision is made to accept the application, the applicant is granted refugee status. They may stay in the UK either indefinitely or for a specified period of time. If the application is refused, the asylum seeker may appeal against the decision. If this process fails, they must leave the UK or be deported.

Regardless of the differences between the two labels, the people affected are among the most oppressed minorities in the UK. The disadvantages they experience result not only from the trauma they have experienced in their country of origin and the efforts and personal costs of coming to a new country, but from the reception they receive – mistrusted, regarded as 'a problem', housed in poor and sometimes dangerous areas, deprived of an adequate income and generally meeting a culture of suspicion.

It is the aim of this study not only to set out the problems faced by people arriving here, particularly in seeking employment, but also to recognise the abilities and the talents they bring. They have much to offer to British culture and the economy, and with the right kinds of support are willing and capable of investing energy, commitment and expertise. Without appropriate help into work and an independent existence, and confined to housing ghettos, they are at risk of joining others who are marginalised through poverty, joblessness and exclusion. They will not be at fault for this, rather an attitude of hostility and the neglect of adequate supports, will have denied them the opportunities to contribute and to gain rewards from their labour. The theme of this report then is to both highlight the potential richness of their contribution, to confront the obstacles that are preventing that contribution and to examine what might make the difference.

The policy context

With regard to employment, people who have been granted refugee status or permission to stay are entitled to work. Until July 2002 asylum seekers, with permission from the Home Office, were permitted to work after being here for six months. This provision has now been abolished and those asylum seekers who did not have permission to work before July 2002 are excluded from employment for a minimum of a year after which they may be able to apply. Alongside this, current government policy regarding asylum seekers is to decrease substantially the number of applications made.

At the same time, paradoxically there is a shortage of skills and labour in the UK economy, and the Government has announced plans to use the immigration system (through the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002) to target workers from abroad to fill the skills gap, including discussions with employers and trade unions to find ways of allowing skilled and unskilled migrants into the country. The UK operates a work permit model of managed migration, whereby employment shortage areas are identified regularly by Home Office/Work Permits UK in consultation with other government departments. Employers with unfilled vacancies in these sectors can recruit from overseas and apply for work permits for

these staff. Annual numbers are around 180,000 and are still growing (DWP, 2003). Many asylum seekers have qualifications and skills that are needed by the economy and they are willing to work. It seems perverse that they are already here and available, yet the Government is not prepared to allow them to make a positive contribution, and encourages the costly process of seeking workers from abroad.

Another strand of this contradictory policy is that for those people granted refugee status, the Government aims to take action towards their integration as equal members of society, and to 'help them develop their potential and contribute to the cultural and economic life of the country' (Home Office 2000, p. 2). It has promised to encourage employers willing to offer work to refugees, and to ensure that all refugees have access to appropriate language training and orientation courses. It recognises that employment is a key area, and that people who are not able to gain employment will become increasingly socially excluded. The National Refugee Integration Forum (NRIF) has been set up to take forward the Government's integration strategy. One of its subgroups, on Adult Education, Training and Employment addresses the specific issues that affect refugee employment. It has identified key issues to be targeted by the integration strategy:

- monitoring research on the skills and experience of refugee jobseekers
- reviewing current provision of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)
- identifying difficulties in accessing adult education and training
- gathering information on employers' resistance to offering work
- promoting understanding amongst employers and professional bodies, of the level of refugee skills

During 2003 the Government produced a preliminary report towards a refugee employment strategy (DWP, 2003), as the first stage towards issuing plans in Spring 2004 to increase the number of refugees in jobs. Initiatives have taken place in the London area, including the setting up of the London Skills Commission to develop a flagship programme to examine the feasibility of a basic and higher skills programme and job brokerage service for refugees. A report is due on this during 2004.

In the ways described above, there has been concern about refugees and employment, and activities have been initiated around the subject of their integration. Meanwhile, asylum seekers are increasingly excluded from the economy and from welfare support, and therefore from society generally. In terms of joined up policies regarding refugees, the contradiction remains that their skills are not being targeted effectively in an economy affected by a skills shortage. Moreover, the personal impact of this, and information about their experiences of looking for jobs, and of being without suitable – or unsuitable – work, is still largely undocumented.

The study

There is a growing body of statistical research about refugees and others with permission to work, and employment in the UK, but there is very little that has attempted to describe their experiences, and to identify the successes and problems of looking for work as they themselves see them. This qualitative study is designed to fill that gap, and to bring to light the stories that lie behind the struggles to adapt to life in this country, the obstacles encountered and the implications for social inclusion. This is an important project in itself, in that it aims to make the voices of refugees themselves heard. It is matched by a second, practical goal: to consider whether better support systems can be identified that will improve and speed up the chances of refugees of finding work that is appropriate to their abilities and experience, and that allows them to increase their choices and their independence.

The study was commissioned by Refugee Action, Manchester, and funded by the Northwest Regional Development Agency (NWDA). The NWDA has a strategic objective to secure economic inclusion. Key activities include: encouraging business

start ups, particularly by ... black and ethnic minority groups: encouraging the public and private sector to employ people from disadvantaged communities and groups and promoting the benefits to employers of equality and diversity in the workforce; developing intermediate labour market initiatives and enabling individuals to compete for job opportunities by equipping them with appropriate skills; and addressing barriers to work. (NWDA Regional Economic Strategy, 2003.) Refugees are an increasingly significant group for inclusion in these goals.

The target audience of the report includes employers, government departments concerned with employment, Job Centres, private employment agencies and refugee support and advice organisations. We hope too it will be of use to refugees and asylum seekers with permission to work, in recognising shared experiences and in finding encouragement and strategies to overcome many of the problems they face.

Broadly the study set out to bring the statistics to life, to tell some of the stories that lie behind them, to put flesh on data that so often hide the struggles experienced by individuals in their attempts to be independent and to connect with the country where they have sought asylum.

Overall 80 people took part in the research, either as members of focus groups or as individual interviewees (see Methods for details). We do not claim that the study is representative of refugees in the Northwest, but we are confident that the issues that have emerged form patterns that will be familiar to many, and the recommendations should be taken seriously by those in a position to make a difference. The report is structured around major themes that emerged from an analysis of the data. Each chapter contains a discussion of the evidence, stories of participants, and a summary of the main findings. The recommendations are drawn from these summaries.

Support for the study

Beth Humphries and Farhat Khan carried out the fieldwork for the research. Nigel Rose and Philip Davis helped with the analysis and generally supervised and supported the study. This group met regularly throughout the life of the study, considered progress reports and offered advice and direction. Progress reports were also sent to Gabrielle Cox of NWDA, whose comments were incorporated into the study.

3 The NWDA strategy for England's Northwest

Introduction

The NWDA has funded this research as one way of informing its Regional Economic Strategy for the Northwest, and as an acknowledgement that refugees have abilities that can contribute to the economic life of the region. The vision set out by NWDA for the first 20 years of this century, to be achieved in partnership with business interests, has the following aims for the region:

- Exploit the growth potential of business sectors
- Improve the competitiveness and productivity of business
- Develop and exploit the region's knowledge base
- Deliver urban renaissance
- Deliver rural renaissance
- Secure economic inclusion
- Develop and maintain a healthy labour market
- Develop the strategic transport, communications and economic infrastructure
- Ensure the availability of a balanced portfolio of employment sites
- Develop and market the region's image

(NWDA Regional Economic Strategy 2003, page 10.)

Partnership with business

The strategy to achieve this involves investing in business development, regeneration, skills and employment, infrastructure and image. The central principles of this work are sustainable development, linking opportunity and need, partnership and subsidiarity, and equality and diversity

"Equality and diversity is an important thread running through this strategy. Removing barriers and encouraging individuals from all communities to achieve their potential will contribute to social equity and economic competitiveness. The opportunities available to the region through its diverse population must be encouraged and developed to the full." (ibid, p7)

The role of the NWDA is to co-ordinate the work of all relevant partners at both local and regional levels. It identifies much strength in the region, including its multicultural and multi-faith character. At the same time, parts of the region have the most serious concentration of unemployment in Europe, a legacy of derelict land (25% of all the country's derelict land is in the Northwest), vast inequalities in health, income, housing and skills.

Economic inclusion

Four specific, interrelated activities, related to economic inclusion are of particular relevance to refugee communities:

- 6.1 Encourage businesses start ups, particularly by women, and black and minority ethnic groups. (Lead partner Small Business Service.)
- 6.3 Encourage the public and private sector to employ people from disadvantaged communities and groups, through positive action programmes and other measures, and promote the benefits to employers of equality and diversity in the workforce. (Lead partner NWDA.)
- 6.5 Develop intermediate labour market initiatives. (Lead partner Job Centre Plus.)
- 6.6 Enable individuals to compete for job opportunities by equipping them with appropriate skills, developing employability initiatives, encouraging equality of opportunity for learning, and addressing barriers to work. (Lead partner Learning and Skills Councils.)

NWDA believes

“An holistic approach is needed, and it will be necessary to link the delivery of economic inclusion measures to other social inclusion and regeneration measures that may be outside the remit of this strategy.”

Conclusion

Refugees and asylum seekers with permission to work are concentrated in the very areas for which NWDA has particularly responsibility. Refugee Action estimate that almost all of the 35,000 refugees and asylum seekers in the Northwest of England live in the worst 20% of wards in the Index of Multiple Deprivation. There are virtually no refugees in other areas. They are likely to be found in the most run down housing (sometimes in property that has lain unused as unfit for people to live in) in estates deprived of resources. They are often housed together, increasing their vulnerability to racist attack and social isolation. Refugees present a paradox; disproportionately skilled and qualified people, but disproportionately likely to be unemployed and living in the poorest neighbourhoods. Refugees constitute a group where resources could be usefully targeted not just to alleviate poverty and distress but to unlock the energy and latent potential of a resource waiting to be tapped for the benefit of the region as a whole.

In setting out the aims and priorities of the NWDA, we have focused largely on those elements that are relevant to the topic of this study. Thus, within a much wider strategy for the economic and social regeneration of the region, there is potential for the needs of refugees and asylum seekers to be met, in terms of their social inclusion through work, the contribution they can make through the knowledge and skills they bring and the training or re-training they may receive to meet the needs of the economy of the Northwest.

4 Existing Data on refugees and employment

Introduction

Research that has been carried out on refugees and employment has given a statistical overview of their situation, which is very useful as a backdrop for this qualitative study. As mentioned earlier, estimates of unemployment or under-employment of refugees in these studies range widely. In 2001 the Industrial Society estimated refugee unemployment to be “anywhere between 60% and 80%”¹ (The unemployment rate for the country as a whole in January 2004 was 4.9%). The Department of Work and Pensions issued a document during 2003 (DWP, 2003) that set the unemployment figure for refugees at 36%. Even this more modest estimate indicates a significant problem. This high level of unemployment is despite the fact that the overwhelming majority had jobs before they came to the UK, and many arrive with good qualifications. Included in these qualifications are teaching, lecturing, medicine, nursing, engineering, law, management, yet in all of these professions refugees find numerous obstacles to practising. One of the most frequently mentioned skills possessed by refugees is information technology (IT), identified in the NWDA's strategy for England's Northwest as a key area of shortage. It is remarkable that until recently there has been no systematic attempt to quantify the skills and qualifications of refugees, or attempt to match them to the needs of the economy. The Home Office Immigration Research and Statistics Service (IRSS) is now undertaking a national, large-scale skills audit. Together with research funded by the NWDA and being carried out by the Northwest Consortium this may begin to offer a clearer picture of the potential available.

The scale of unemployment is matched by problems of under-employment, where most who do find jobs are unlikely to do so at their previous level of experience or training. The range of occupational areas includes: medicine, teaching, engineering, policing, government, banking, accountancy, surveying, business, agriculture, forestry and journalism. Manual workers are in jobs as welders, gardeners, farmers, shoemakers, mechanics and labourers and in the service industries. Research carried out by Bloch (Bloch, 2002) of a sample of 400 refugees, found less than 30 % working at the time of the study. The majority of these were working in a limited number of occupations such as catering, and have been unable to make use of their previous skills and experience. Existing data is remarkably consistent in its identification of the main barriers to work faced by refugees. They are discussed below.

Recognition of academic or vocational qualifications

A key problem in finding work is the non-recognition of qualifications gained outside the European Union. For some qualifications there is no recognition in the UK, so that holders of qualifications are obliged to re-train or to move to other work. There is a system for doctors to complete a process including examinations to allow them to practice in the UK, but this is lengthy and costly. All the studies reviewed identified this as a barrier to employment. The BMA News Review (29 April 2000) was quoted as stating, ‘Britain is squandering the talents of people who want nothing more than to get back into medicine at a time of national shortage of doctors’. Glover et al (2001) were critical of the language test doctors are required to pass, which is at a higher standard than is expected from UK medical school graduates. Sargeant and Forna (2001) recommended: that assessment of qualifications should begin whilst a decision on status is awaited; that a national scheme for recognising qualifications should be established; and that bridging training should be developed by professional bodies.

The Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Union was ratified by the UK and came into force in July 2003 (UK NARIC 2003). The Convention obliges countries to assess all applications to recognise higher education entry/leaving qualifications gained in another country covered by the Convention. This is a first step towards having a coherent system for assessing equivalence. Unfortunately as yet only EU countries and Australia, Mexico, Pakistan, Singapore and South Africa are members. However this is a developing field and holds possibilities to make recognition of qualifications more straightforward.

¹ This was written prior to the removal of the right to work for asylum seekers who had been in the country for 6 months. This policy change took place in July 2002. The Industrial Society figures related to both refugees and asylum seekers.

English language

A consistent and major problem identified in the research is poor English language skills. Indications are that people with fluent English have more chance of getting a job than others without good English (Shields and Wheatley Price, 2003; Shiferaw and Hagos, 2002). There is evidence that for people in work, language fluency is likely to increase the hourly wage they receive (Glover et al, 2000). Sargeant and Forna (2001) recommended that language training should be available for all asylum seekers, and that all English language testing should be standardised so that employers can recognise an applicant's level of competence, rather than depending on intuitive or variable standards. It is worth noting that all of the studies dealt with issues related to English language on the assumption that the problem is one-dimensional, that is that asylum seekers cannot communicate in English. The research focuses on the deficiencies of refugees themselves, and there is little acknowledgement of the fact that many come to the UK because they already speak English, some arriving from countries of origin that have a historical link with Britain. The research we undertook suggests that this issue is more complex than this, and that often the English 'problem' needs further analysis beyond a crude assessment of 'not having enough English'. These complexities will be addressed later in the report.

Employers' concerns

The research carried out by Sargeant and Forna (2001) identified a number of areas of confusion amongst employers about their rights and obligations in offering work to refugees: fears about 'bogus' asylum seekers; no standard permission to work document is given to refugees; wording on immigration papers is ambiguous or unclear, unhelpful attitudes of immigration authorities; bureaucracy involved for employers in demonstrating that an employee has a right to work; non-issue of a National Insurance Number or delays in issuing NI numbers; fears among employers of cultural clashes/differences. Similar finding resulted from research by Aldridge and Waddington (2001) for the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE). Sargeant and Forna (2001) made a number of recommendations to resolve some of these problems, including: standard permission to work document issued; NI number issued at the same time as permission to work; creation of a national skills database. An experiment based in Liverpool has now finished but may lead to changes in the way that NI numbers are allocated. It demonstrated that it was possible to issue NI numbers within 24 days for 80% of applicants.

Psychological well-being

A Home Office supported study set out to examine labour market outcomes and the psychological well-being of minority ethnic migrants (that is individuals other than white born outside the UK) [Shields and Wheatley Price, 2003]. These are not refugees specifically, but some of the material is relevant. In particular they investigated factors influencing labour market performance, especially access to employment. Compared with white migrants who progressed quickly in the job market, this group were severely disadvantaged, taking four times as long to progress. It is clear from this study that joblessness leads to significant deterioration on reported well-being, and a marked rise in anxiety and depression, loss of confidence and self-esteem. These were exacerbated by related factors such as the level of household income, the location, level of crime and racial harassment experienced, and general state of health.

Shiferaw and Hagos (2003) also identified difficulties for refugees related to mental stress and trauma both in their country of origin and disorientation in the country of asylum, as well as worries about cultural differences (mannerisms, accent, body language and codes of dress) and financial problems. Aldridge and Waddington (2001) had people in their study who were hampered in employment and educational opportunities by negativity and uncertainty about their situation. They were particularly concerned about the mental health of female asylum seekers who are in the minority and often housed in mainly male environments, thus increasing their vulnerability.

Routes to employment

The research carried out by the Refugee Council looked at how refugees go about seeking employment as one of its aims (Shiferaw and Hagos, 2002). It confirmed other research that most refugees are unemployed or underemployed. Informal personal contact was the most common means of getting information and advice as well as applying for jobs, except for those who have been in the UK for a longer period of time, and who tended to use mainstream career and employment services. It also appeared that the higher the level of qualification and work experience of one's country of origin, the more difficult it is to secure suitable employment.

Some researchers thought volunteering is a useful strategy for people seeking work in the voluntary sector (Gillett and Gregg, 1999), and that it affords an opportunity to use skills and practice spoken English. However, there is also a suggestion in the literature, that volunteering is a positive experience only when it occurs in moderation rather than excess. In excess, unpaid employment has instead a negative effect (Gallie et al, 1994). A London based study (Stopforth, 2001) found that refugees regarded things such as a well-written C.V. and interview practice, followed by settled housing and accepted right to remain in the UK, as more important than voluntary work as key factors for success. The study found that women were more likely to have carried out voluntary work than men, and suggested that for older people voluntary work may be a necessary precursor to any paid work.

However, we suspect that the reality is more complex than this 'either/or' view. As with English language proficiency, there are a number of factors that need to be taken into account in considering this area, that have not been addressed in the literature. What for example, do different people understand by 'volunteering', and what meanings do they ascribe to formal and informal paid work? And are there cultural dimensions that need to be considered? We take up these points in the later discussion of the research findings.

Racism and discrimination

Most of the research reviewed identified discrimination and prejudiced images of asylum seekers as at play in the problems people face in seeking work. This has not been very well defined by the studies, though Sargeant and Forna (2001) are clear that it is fed by restrictive immigration policies. The Audit Commission's *Another Country* (2000) and Aldridge and Waddington (2001) both identify racism and prejudice against foreigners as factors in the mix, and Shiferaw and Hagos (2002) locate this in the workplace where difficulties were perceived as 'fellow workers creating problems', 'hidden discrimination', 'attitudes of managers' and 'cultural differences'. Although difficult to pin down, it is clear that many refugees regard racism and discrimination as an aspect of the barriers they face.

Conclusion

The problems identified above constitute the major difficulties highlighted by the research. Most of this data was gained through quantitative and statistical means, and one can only guess at the cost of these experiences in human terms. The current study aimed to look more closely at these problems, including those that have been constructed as inadequacies on the part of the refugees themselves. These cannot be explored through quantitative studies, and this study aims to examine what they mean in terms of people's lived experience, where they found strength and support, and what they think would have made a difference.

At the same time, there are success stories, both in individual terms and through collective responses to the problems faced. It is important to uncover these stories too, and we look for positive experiences of seeking work, so that these can be disseminated to influence practice on a wider scale. We hope to draw the connections between these individual stories and the actions needing to be taken to impact on the structures that create many of the problems identified.

5 Methodology

Introduction

As shown earlier, the research that exists about related employment issues is largely statistical, and even then is not always directly relevant to refugees and asylum seekers with permission to work. The statistics are of course important as a context for this study, but services cannot be designed on the basis of statistics, and the methods chosen for this research are purposefully qualitative to achieve depth and description rather than scale. It is the reality of lived experience and the effects on real people's lives that will provide an indication of what needs to be done. As with much qualitative research, the themes that emerge are often recognised as connecting with the experiences of many people in similar circumstances, even though they cannot claim to be representative of all. This section describes the specific aims, the methods, the sample and some issues arising from the research.

Aims of the study

- i. to identify refugees and asylum seekers eligible for work
- ii. to elicit their views and experiences of seeking work
- iii. to make recommendations regarding appropriate support towards employment

Actions

- i. review of existing research
- ii. individual interviews with a sample of those with permission to work
- iii. focus group interviews
- iv. report and recommendations

The sample

Guidelines were agreed to identify a sample. Thus we sought to include those:

- who have been in the UK 0-5 years; who have been in the UK more than 5 years;
- from settled communities; from comparatively newly arrived communities;
- women and men in the age range 16-65;
- people dispersed across the Northwest;
- who are successful job finders; without jobs or in infrequent short-term work;
- from English-speaking countries of origin; who learned English on arrival in the UK;
- who learned English as a second language in their country of origin;
- with professional qualifications or other training; with no training.

Overall 41 people were interviewed individually (16 women and 25 men), and 39 took part in focus groups, making a total of 80 people involved in the study. In the focus groups approximately 90% were unemployed. They are living largely in the Manchester, Liverpool, Bolton, Oldham and Barrow areas. Amongst the individuals interviewed eighteen were in work at the time of interview and 23 were unemployed. Nineteen had either professional or technical qualifications, nineteen had none and three had attended but been unable to complete university courses in their country of origin. The table in Appendix 1 shows the profile of the sample.

Process

The majority of the individual interviews were tape-recorded (see the interview schedule in Appendix 2). Where people preferred not to be tape-recorded, or where the context of the interview made this inappropriate, we took notes. Four focus groups took place, three of which were tape-recorded. They consisted of:

- Pakistani mixed
- Afghan/Iraq/Iran mixed gender
- Afghan/Iraq/Iran women
- A group of mixed gender doctors from Sri Lanka, Czech Republic, Iran and Somalia.

Notes were taken by one of us in all of the focus groups, and three groups were also tape-recorded (the focus group questions are in Appendix 3).

There was provision in the project to offer participants a token amount of £10 as an acknowledgement of the time, effort and inconvenience involved in taking part. This proved awkward, as although some people understood the motives behind the gesture, others declined to accept the cash because they felt they had not done anything to earn it, or else said they had been very happy to help.

Inevitably in this kind of research a great deal of material is accumulated, particularly through tape-recorded interviews, each lasting around one hour. This makes analysis complex and messy. We transcribed approximately one third of the interviews, two of the four focus groups, and listened to all the rest, so that we became very familiar with the content. We had in mind the specific areas for investigation identified by the research, but were also alerted to issues not considered in advance. Recurring themes were extracted and used as a framework for organising the data. We were also concerned to be sensitive to unusual circumstances unique to individuals and not forming patterns. These are often significant in themselves.

The method of qualitative research has as a central feature the direct speech of the participants, which is often much more vital and rich than when it is reported in the words of the researchers. This technique has been used extensively in the report, and provides a powerful emphasis for the more general discussion.

Conclusion

In analysing the data, we looked for themes that recurred throughout the interviews, and we have organised the findings around these themes. We were also concerned to pick up issues that perhaps were not widely shared, but seemed to us to be significant, and we have included those where appropriate. The participants were from a range of backgrounds and experiences, and of course had some characteristics in common which we have drawn on in the discussion. There were also groups of people that might be regarded as presenting unique concerns. These include Somali young men, professionally qualified people and those without professional qualifications. We offer a discussion of the concerns arising from these groups.

6 The psychological and physical impact

Introduction

The policy background to issues of health is that the Government has announced plans to apply health tests to all immigrants and asylum seekers, as part of the assessment process on their application. That most asylum seekers arrive in the UK having suffered injury and emotional trauma should be obvious, given that they have a well-founded fear of persecution. However, consideration needs also to be given to the deterioration in health they experience after they have arrived in Britain, because of their experiences of rejection and discrimination.

We start with this topic, because the emotional, physical and psychological state of people in the job-seeking process has a profound influence on their confidence and their self-esteem, and therefore to some extent on their chances of securing a job. When expectations of work are constantly frustrated, self-confidence is shattered. In turn people may not present themselves assertively to employers, become more reluctant to apply for jobs, and the downward spiral continues. So not only is finding a job important, but the timing is also crucial, and any intervention to support them needs to be early and appropriate.

Moreover, for those who are asylum seekers, we found that the stress created by uncertainty about their future – especially related to their immigration status – added to and had an impact on the effort needed to find work. The experience of waiting day after day for a decision from the Home Office (or in some cases for the results of appeals, or for deportation papers) has a debilitating effect on the search for work:

“Two years is too much for us. Two years you are waiting for any answer. Two years – every day we look for the door – maybe a letter will come. After that, they say you have been refused. This has made me ill, and I don’t know if I should look for work.”

When they do make attempts to look for a job, rejection can have a disproportionate impact because of these immigration-related problems. The research carried out on the population generally, on minority ethnic groups and on refugees and asylum seekers, is clear that joblessness leads to significant deterioration in well-being and in both physical and psychological health (Shields and Wheatley Price, 2003). Level of household income, location of housing, the level of crime and racial harassment experienced also affect health. There is particular concern for the mental health and vulnerability of women refugees and asylum seekers who are often housed in mainly male environments (Aldridge and Waddington, 2001). All of these factors were observed at play in this current study.

Work experiences there and here

It must be said that the people in our study overall showed remarkable strengths and resilience, given the trauma they had experienced before they came to this country, the humiliation and poverty they have been subjected to as asylum seekers, the uncertainty of their immigration status, and for many of them, the discouraging hunt for work. An overwhelming message given to us time and again is that refugees and asylum seekers want and need to work, both for a sense of dignity and self-respect and to give something back to a nation that they felt had taken them in and had offered them safety. They are also people who have had many years of working in their country of origin.

J from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is now aged 44 and had a high profile university job before he came to this country a year ago. He has found the whole process of looking for work humiliating and deeply disturbing:

“I was doing high-level work, then I experienced political problems so I had to leave. I have been abandoned here. I need to start all over again. By nature I want to work. I have always worked, but now I’m there doing nothing. I went to the job centre, they kept my profile, advised me to go to college to improve my English, but no jobs were offered. They told me there are no jobs in the area. I went to AMAS (job agency) and I was told to come back in two months. I don’t want any other job than teaching. I could be a teaching assistant to improve my language and get experience. This country has invited us to stay here permanently, so we are here to do what? The immigration officer I met for my interview, when he heard about what I am he was surprised, and say why, a person like you could be of help to this country. But no, I am doing nothing. I don’t know the way out. I wonder what to do to improve my situation. I don’t know what to do. I tried my best to get British friends, but they are very reserved. Maybe they are scared. They acknowledge we are people of good profile, but when it comes to friendship they hold back.”

Prolonged unemployment has led to a loss of confidence in the skills and knowledge they had gained in their country of origin, and they were aware of time passing and competence lost. A number of people we interviewed were clearly depressed or traumatised as a result of the length of time it was taking to have any sense that they could be independent and be materially and emotionally secure. All of those on state benefits were anxious to escape from this system. Almost everyone in the study was taking appropriate steps to gain work. In particular all those who needed to (about two thirds) had moved towards enhancing their proficiency in English, and in developing the ICT skills identified as important by the NWDA. At the same time, routine and persistent rejection by employers, or frustrations in their attempts to learn English, resulted in a steady drip of discouragement and a fear of loss of respect from others:

“The effect of having no job or a low paying job is that you end up living in a poor council estate, it belittles how you look at society, is this the British that ruled us? Will my children ever see me as I was back home? Will they believe that I am an intellectual, have self respect and aspirations despite how I am living presently?”

“I feel very depressed sometimes because I work with other women who mostly do not know any English and therefore I know that my language skills will never improve. My small son speaks mostly English now and gets very frustrated when I and his father cannot communicate as well as we should with him. There are times when I would almost decide to go back but then when I think of the dangers we would face I try to console myself that maybe things will improve in the future.”

“Every time I go for a job I see very quickly that I will not be offered anything. They look, and I know everything...I still look every day for a letter, a reply, but it does not come. This gives me headaches.”

“I give you two persons. One of them is English and speaks good English. One of them has an insurance number, he can stay in this country. One of them cannot speak good English. Which one is good for you? It is the same every time. Then they make me wait. Then they say no job for me. I think, should I continue to apply for jobs?”

Finding work

There was no doubt that the achievement of getting a job and having an independent income was an important factor in enhancing self-esteem and in encouraging a sense of making a contribution. Participants in the study were proud to be working, to have a choice in where they lived and to have the means to make a comfortable home. This step allowed them to entertain ambitions for the future – further training and qualifications, a more prestigious job and security for them and their families, all of which led to a positive outlook.

However, this also has its down side. The effort involved in holding down a job, in furthering one's education and in looking after a family can take its toll on mental and physical health:

“[Refugees] work three or four times more than local people to be sure to keep the job, and they want to pay British people back who have given them asylum. Then they attend education classes to try to further their education and their qualifications. It happened to me and I became ill because I had no time to rest in all of this.”

“Most Afghans are supporting families back home in Afghanistan and even Pakistan and this forces the person here to accept any job available and at any wage offered. We have also heard that the Government intends to send back Afghans even if they have leave to remain. Therefore everyone is trying to make and save as much money as possible, doing whatever work is available.”

“My husband is sick and I am the sole earning member of the family. I have two children back in Pakistan that I am supporting and I cannot afford to keep off work (in a factory).”

These views represented a small number of people in the study, but nevertheless illustrates that illness as a result of competing demands is a risk for all. Moreover, for a number of employed people, the relevance of the work they did to their qualifications and experience, was as important to a sense of well-being as was the fact that they were working and earning an income. Hardly any of those interviewed were involved in work for which they had been trained. Being in work per se was not sufficient if they were not able to work in their areas of expertise, and indeed the possibility that they might not ever again be allowed to practice their profession or vocation, was a source of despair for some. After all, they had made sacrifices and their families had paid for years of training, they themselves have a vocation to particular professions. The sense of bereavement experienced through having to leave their homeland is exacerbated by a profound feeling of loss of crucial aspects of their identity and their source of income. For these people their current job has led to frustration and anger, to a sense of being undervalued, and for some to stress and poor health. A large majority referred to the sense of depression about this. Below is one example:

“At times I get very depressed because I love to teach, but what can one do? As a refugee you do not have much choices, you have to accept and be grateful for whatever you get.”

Some professionals interviewed were not so compliant. They could have found jobs in factories or other manual work, but point blank refused to consider these possibilities. These included a university professor, a statistician and a doctor who preferred to retain some sense of dignity rather than take on what they regarded as menial work. Professionals were often steered by employment agencies towards jobs that suggested these officials had no idea of what might be suitable for them, and were acting on stereotypical notions that refugees and asylum seekers are all unskilled and uneducated. Their contribution in their country of origin is not appreciated or valued, and they found themselves required to adjust their expectations to the lowest point on the job ladder. The sensation is often one of not having existed before coming to Britain. This absence of recognition is insulting and demoralising, and as one woman expressed it, 'you get pushed even further down in life'.

The prospect of re-training can be a discouraging one for all who may have to face it, and perhaps more so for those who have spent much time and money on training for their chosen profession. The struggle to put together a new life and the mental resilience required should not be underestimated, nor should the psychological and physical impact of being denied opportunities.

The experience of working illegally also has risks for the mental and physical health of refugees and asylum seekers. We heard of people working illegally because they know little English and have few choices, or because they cannot get a regular job. Employers exploit their situation by offering very low wages and giving them jobs that are heavy or dangerous. The absence of any protection and the sense of powerlessness to look for something better, contributes to a sense of despair and hopelessness.

Racism

Several of the participants were forthright about their experiences of racism and the effects on their psychological health. Others were reticent about speaking out, but it was clear they recognised the dynamics of racism. It manifested itself in different ways. Some of these have been alluded to above in the assumptions made by employment agency and other officials, that refugees have no qualifications and are only suitable for bottom-of-the-ladder jobs. Treatment by employers in exploiting workers, who do not know about employment rights and the minimum wage, was mentioned frequently in the study.

“I was a fashion designer in my own country, and I have done secretarial work. I was offered a job in an office for £75 a week. I worked there for a short time, but it was not enough.”

“Some of my friends and me got a job in a factory. We worked 14 hours a day and were paid £20. It was very discouraging.”

In this context, employers were also reported as offering jobs clearly unsuited to refugees' experience, and giving wages not on a par with that of other workers doing similar jobs. This poor treatment is exacerbated by employers' knowledge that refugees are likely to have difficulties in finding another job.

M, a disabled African man explained to potential employers that he was unable to use his arm and therefore could not do any carrying or manual work. He said

“The companies I went to gave me unsuitable jobs. They said there was nothing else for me, but I knew this was not true because I knew other people who worked there.”

At first he could not believe that this could happen, but now believes that such actions are racially motivated. He thinks the pecking order for jobs is 'whites, Caribbean women, Chinese, with Black Africans at the bottom'.

He now approaches applying for jobs cautiously and with much lower expectations, in the belief that his suitability is not being judged on his qualifications and experience, but where he is located in the hierarchy of 'races'. Not everyone was as candid as M in talking about their views on racism, although a number of others implied that they viewed their negative experiences as having similar roots.

One man from Iran told us of a frightening experience that affected his ability to actively seek work

“It happened as I was walking in the street. I was shot in the neck by an air gun. I was in hospital three days. I didn't know if it was the mullahs who had found me, or someone showing they did not want me here. It made me frightened to go out to look for work.”

This is a particularly extreme incident, but it does illustrate the harassment and subsequent fear that exists for refugees, and the impact on their mental health. At the same time, it must be said the man described above also experienced support and concern from a number of people, and indeed his terrifying experience led to some temporary work:

“After the shooting, I love these people, I love this country, because do you know what – one person shot in my neck, ten or twenty people came to my home to say sorry it has happened. One of them promised to give me work as an artist. I got three months work from her. But I want to discontinue from benefits forever. I have two arms and two eyes, I have my body, my heart. I want to work. Why should I take benefit? I must have an answer if I can stay here.”

Although there was some positive outcome to the story relayed above the last sentence in the quote above conveys the man's sense of desperation about the need to end the uncertainty he lives with constantly, both about his immigration status and the prospects of more permanent work.

It is now accepted that there are two sides to the coin of racism. It is known that experiences of racism result in general ill health and mental illness. It is also known that experiences of diagnosis and treatment are a result of institutionalised racism (black people are more likely than white people to be diagnosed as 'schizophrenic' and to receive chemical rather than counselling treatment). Exploration of this latter aspect was not part of the remit of the study, but has been identified by other research. All of these experiences of racism have their impact on well-being, resulting at best in chronic depression and at worst in major psychiatric and physical illness.

Although the findings of the study do not suggest that women refugees and asylum seekers have greater health problems than men, one of the focus groups identified a number of pressures that are specific to women. For example, women alone or with children may not be accustomed to travelling without a man, dealing with immigration officials or handling money, and suffer stress as a result. They may be carrying physical injuries related to childbirth or private or group violence. On arrival here, they and their children are likely to be dispersed to poor housing in deprived areas, and to be subjected to racist attacks. They also live in fear of NASS officials coming to inspect their houses. Many live with uncertainty about the future for them and their families, and whether they will be allowed to stay in the UK. In the case of asylum seekers, the resulting stress may continue for years:

“For example, we wait for a letter from the Home Office to tell us if we can stay one year, two year, indefinitely or if we have to leave. It's very bad. Every day, day after day we wait for a letter, it's very bad. It's worse for women. If we are waiting for the Home Office to decide, what is the future for me, and the future for my family, and can we stay here or no? And always we have worry, stress, shock... and woman can't do all the journeys herself. I know a woman who arrived here with two children. She was stressful every day. She was angry, she was really bad. Because she was a woman she didn't have permission to go everywhere. And if the Home Office sends her back, she worries that she cannot go everywhere without a man. She has no money, and it is dangerous. Woman is at more risk than man. So she is always fearful of what will happen to her and her children if she has to leave.”

This demonstrates the particular fears facing single women, whether with or without children – the ever-present nightmare of uncertainty, and beyond that, the consequences and risks of a negative decision.

Moreover, some women face feeding and clothing their children on below the poverty line income. All these experiences cause anxiety, sleeplessness and depression. We interviewed several women who appeared to us to be seriously depressed, some of whom were living in poor accommodation and with very little income. For a small number of women who did not live in poor areas and for whom poverty was not so uncomfortably close, depression resulting from social

isolation and low job prospects was clearly evident, and recognised by them as damaging to themselves and their relationships with children and partners. The all women focus group agreed that for all refugees the main problems are first, English language, and second, health problems. A third was related to the problems of single motherhood:

“If we cannot speak English we will never get a job. That is the biggest problem. Then lots of refugees have health problems because of the journey we came. Sometimes refugees have lots of children to look after and many are single mothers.”

A number of the women had physical health problems that interfered with their attempts to get work, especially in the area of their previous experience. One woman who had worked as a nurse in a hospital in Iran had damaged her back on the journey to UK. This ended her chances of going back to nursing. She would now like to work in an office, but sitting for long periods was also an obstacle to this kind of work:

“I went on the computer course and I would like to be able to use that skill, but again you have to sit at a computer, so that was no good. I am also a single mother and I have to look after the children. I do not sleep well because of the pain. I could work in a house – looking after it for someone, and cooking, so then I could be at home when children come from school. But I have not found anything.”

Conclusion

Recognition of the many factors that impact on refugees and asylum seekers is an important precursor in understanding their need for appropriate supports in seeking work and in settling in a new country. It has been established that poor housing, poor services, joblessness, isolation and stress are a poisonous cocktail for the UK's refugees and asylum seekers. The study by Ferguson and Barclay (2002) in Glasgow highlights similar mental health issues as have been discussed here. It needs to be recognised that racism is a factor that informs this situation, and needs to be taken more seriously. Government plans to apply health tests to all immigrants signal a lack of concern for the emotional and physical needs of people fleeing persecution. Indeed they suggest that a claim for asylum can be judged by the health of the applicant, or that the UK is not prepared to take seriously the impact of traumatic experiences.

Moreover, for many refugees health problems can become health disasters when they enter the UK, since some doctors are unwilling to register them permanently, or they themselves are unwilling to seek treatment until a crisis occurs (Jackson, 2003). Grinding poverty compounds such circumstances. Many of the obstacles they face are intended to discourage them and others who might arrive, and this has been identified as a central plank of government policy. However they have been given permission to seek for employment, and they appear to be pursuing appropriate routes to acquire skills required by the economy. Many of them arrive with such skills. There seems to be little sense in their being punished as described here. They need protection, encouragement and support.

Recommendations

1. Training needs to be carried out for workers at agencies supporting refugees back into work. This training should include coverage of the psychological impact of: enforced joblessness due to a lack of permission to work; trauma suffered prior to arriving in the UK; bereavement due to loss of homeland; loss of status of people who were previously working, often in highly skilled jobs; pressure of having to learn how to live in a new land; having to live on a very low income whilst awaiting decision on immigration status; the extended period where there is uncertainty about whether they will be allowed to stay in the UK; racism and the continuing frustration of not being able to use the skills that they have.
2. The Government should consider separately, and as a priority, the “permission to work” element of an asylum application, pending consideration of the full application, as the extended time period between when people entering the UK and being allowed to work leads to loss of skills and psychological trauma, making eventual employment more difficult.
3. Failing granting of permission to work, the Government should take into account the longer term effects both on the individual and on community cohesion and should consider ways to assist asylum seekers to minimise the deleterious effects of enforced joblessness.

7 Training and Qualifications

Introduction

Many people who seek asylum in the UK come with both professional qualifications and extensive experience of working in their country of origin. Others who may not have qualifications will certainly have prior experience of work of various sorts. We did not meet anyone who had not worked in their country of origin. We did meet people who were too young to work before they came to the UK, but who have not had a job since they arrived as children. On the face of it, it might be assumed that people with professional backgrounds will have fewer problems than unskilled workers in finding work. The reality is that they face many barriers, and in some respects are more disadvantaged than others without qualifications. This is confirmed by research carried out by Shiferaw and Hagos, (2002). In this section we focus specifically on those people who have come to the UK with qualifications from their country of origin

We met people with a wide range of professional backgrounds including teachers, nurses, journalists, artists, doctors, lawyers, and university lecturers. The all-women focus group included a chemist, a laboratory technician, a teacher, an electrical engineer, a hairdresser and an assistant nurse. In all nearly half of those interviewed individually had professional qualifications. Some of them have information and computer technology (ICT) skills. There are a number of dimensions to the problems they face.

Acceptability of professional qualifications

The first obstacle is the acceptability of the qualifications gained abroad. This is a major frustration for many refugees, who will have spent several years at university and will have worked in their chosen field for several more years before they had to leave their country of origin. All of those we interviewed understood and accepted that some orientation to the different aspects of the job as practiced in the UK is necessary, but in some professions they felt the qualification is dismissed altogether. Where there is equivalence, often those we interviewed did not seem to know about it. In teaching for example, interviewees believed there is no acknowledgement of qualifications gained outside the UK. Yet the Overseas Teachers Programme exists for teachers whose qualifications are assessed as being equivalent to UK teaching qualifications. No one mentioned this in the interviews. The system works by candidates first finding a teaching job, and then they undergo a term's training to allow them to put together a portfolio, which is assessed by UK NARIC. They can have up to four years to complete the process. This is a much simpler system than that for doctors, for instance, and it is relatively inexpensive. However, candidates for this have to find a job in a school in the first instance before they can proceed, and this is the major stumbling block. Support in placing them would be an enormous advantage.

Teachers whose qualifications are not judged to be equivalent to UK qualifications are required to gain a PGCE in this country, and will have to pay overseas rates tuition fees (if they have come from outside the EEA [European Economic Area]). They are faced with a complete re-training, with time and cost implications.

Systems have been developed to re-train nurses and doctors to permit them to work here. We interviewed a 37-year old nurse who has been in the UK just over three months. Already she has been granted indefinite leave to remain. She left her certificates at home in her country of origin so cannot show her qualifications. She applied to the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) for registration, which would entitle her to work as a nurse. However she will have to pay a fee to be considered by the RCN, there is no guarantee her application will be accepted (indeed it is unlikely her application will be accepted without any certification), and there is no refund of the fee:

“If I am accepted I will have to do a period of unpaid practical work and a re-orientation to nursing before I receive my certificate allowing me to practice as a nurse in the UK. It is a long process to go through, especially when the NHS is desperate to employ qualified nurses. I also do not know how I would survive without money over this period...Now I have an interview next week for a care assistant in social services.”

Meanwhile she is applying for care assistant jobs, but she sees her limited language ability and lack of UK experience as the main obstacles to finding any work. Unfortunately although she has applied to learn English at a college, there is a waiting list for that. Meanwhile she is looking for summer classes to help her to practice. The problems with learning English and lack of experience were a story we heard repeatedly. Learning English may come eventually with tuition and practice, but UK experience comes only when work is offered.

The position of doctors is worth some attention here, since a mechanism does exist for a reorientation to medicine in this country, which was well known amongst the doctors we interviewed, and a consideration of their position is helpful as a case study of what might be possible more generally. We interviewed a number of doctors and none of them objected to the need for passing examinations to practice in the UK, but all of them felt the process is made difficult and is particularly costly. In order to pass the test for English language for example, one has to achieve a level that is higher than that for university entrance requirements (see The role of English for further discussion of this). The focus was said to be on technique to pass the exam, not on how well one has learned the language. The requirement to carry out observation on a hospital ward is often a humiliating experience that can affect a doctor's confidence. Some doctors who had come from senior positions in their country of origin felt ignored and dismissed as they followed as part of the retinue of a consultant. They felt forbidden to speak and had lower status than students who received more attention because 'there is a responsibility to get them through their exams'. Some doctors felt they were treated insensitively, and were largely dismissed in the process.

At the same time, doctors are relatively well supported in that on arrival in the UK. They are guided by immigration officials, towards contact with the British Medical Association (BMA) where they are given a package of information about the process for becoming eligible to work as a medical practitioner in Britain. Also there are now a growing number of projects attached to universities or hospitals, set up specifically to support doctors through the examinations required before they can practice. We interviewed a group of doctors attached to a support project based at Hope Hospital, Salford, where they are helped to prepare their C.V. and coached in applying for jobs. The project also helps with photocopying of documents, which would otherwise be expensive for them. These projects are often able to offer financial support. This is important because the cost implications are heavy. Those we interviewed said cost was a major factor along with the time required – over a year in some cases. Moreover there is no guarantee of a job at the end of the process. Of the four doctors in the focus group, only one was working at the time of the interview. The others, who had completed the course and were ready for work, had been seeking jobs through the medical press for a number of months without success. The anaesthetist, who has found a job, said she responded to an advertisement and got the job against competition from a number of other applicants. This was not the general experience, either in the focus group or amongst other doctors we interviewed:

“The first job is always the most difficult to find, to enter the NHS. The most important thing for us is to be a doctor, so we are not very particular if the speciality we are offered is different from our own. Once we get in we will then negotiate when we are more secure.”

A suggestion that was made by doctors was for an allocation of jobs to be reserved for refugees who complete the course. They could then use this as a stepping-stone and a source of references to become independent in finding other work: 'all we need is that initial step and we can look after ourselves after that'. This is in some ways an attractive suggestion which would justify the investment involved in helping doctors become eligible to practice in the UK, though whether it would be welcomed by other UK-trained, newly-qualified doctors is a moot point.

Clearly there is a need for a more general, systematic process for facilitating professional groups to practice in this country. That for doctors is the most developed to date, although other occupational groups such as teachers and nurses, have a system for facilitating members of their professional back into practice. A number of general points can be drawn from the ways the system works for them, which might apply to other groups:

- The level of English required. There seems no justification for setting a higher standard than for, say, university entrance. A larger number of doctors would be able to practice earlier if this was reviewed. A nationally agreed level of English at a realistic standard, applied across all professional groups, would ease the process without compromising quality;
- All professional groups have professional organisations concerned for their welfare and who are guardians of standards. As we have seen, some of them have a structure in place to support individuals in re-orienting to current practices. They might, with financial incentives from government, rationalise their programmes for this to include refugees, and give consideration to whether the time scale set could be shortened. They might also follow the lead of the BMA and initiate contact with people arriving here, offering advice, information and contacts in the area where they are dispersed or move to;
- Most crucially and related to the above, refugees (and others) will need some financial support during their period of re-orientation, otherwise many will not be able to complete the course and their skills will be lost to the country;
- The issue of confidence is also important. The human effects can be devastating on qualified people who have given much of their time, commitment and financial resources to training in a particular profession and find themselves excluded from practice. Also over time their knowledge may be lost or become outdated. The humiliation of the re-training process reported above affects self-esteem and self-image. Along with all the suggestions identified here, there needs to be careful and sensitive treatment of people going through the system, which professional organisations will have to consider and plan.

Such investment would make sound economic sense, since it is cheaper and quicker to retrain and re-orientate than it is to produce new graduates to the professions. In terms of community capacity building it would engage experienced practitioners in making a contribution, and in turn offer them job satisfaction in their chosen profession.

Doing other work

An alternative that many have to consider is to change profession. Some professionally qualified people, who find themselves unable to work in their own profession, have been forced to find jobs in other fields. A number of professional people were in jobs quite unrelated to their profession, and this is a cause of frustration and sometimes anger.

We met a number of people who are employed in refugee support organisations as advice workers, and who feel they are offering something worthwhile to their own community as well as other communities. Others prefer to seek work that is related to their original profession. One doctor said he was looking for work in a hospital as a nursing assistant or a laboratory assistant, though as yet without success. Those without evidence of their qualifications pursued jobs in their own field, but always met the barrier of not being able to provide the evidence, or not having qualified in the UK. They eventually gave up trying and are looking for other work. A chemist is involved in voluntary work with children. She says 'Working with children is not what I want to do. I want to go back to working as a chemist. I will have to go to university for 4 years. I have not yet applied because my English is not yet perfect'.

Yet others feel able to apply only for menial work, as did a nurse/midwife who was applying for cleaning jobs. Of course many are understandably reluctant to take jobs in restaurant kitchens or cleaning, yet feel forced to consider them:

***“You think, well I’m fed up of living on benefit, I want to support myself, and then they tell you what you’re going to be paid – “Well, for you, you’ll get £5” while somebody else is getting £8 or £12. Because you’re fed up of being dependent, you think whatever I get I’ll survive, I’m tired of lining up at the Post Office, you’re forced to get into whatever. You end up being enlightened and saying, OK I was cheated here, but you need the money. There’s that element in it, whatever we come with, it’s not respected. Whatever your qualifications it’s like, “What do you know anyway?”*”**

For two of the women in the all-women focus group, difficulties in finding a job were compounded by health problems (a recurring theme in the study as described earlier). All the others had sought work in social care, hospitals, housework, but without success. They were told they had to have certificates to show they could work in these areas. Several of them had taken up voluntary work in charity shops, community centres, a primary school, but faced frustrations because they could not pursue their original job.

Even when people do apply for other jobs, they are met with the problem of not having UK experience. One woman who had been a high school teacher for 15 years in Iraq applied for several jobs unrelated to her profession. At one supermarket chain where she applied she was told, ‘Sorry you don’t have experience’. Her view was that she had a great deal of experience as a single mother, as a teacher, as a volunteer with a refugee support organisation, yet it seems the company did not have the imagination to see her potential in their stores, even though they offer training for the job to all their new staff. We met a Somali midwife who was looking for cleaning jobs and was told time and again that she needed more experience in the UK. She has sought the help of a refugee advice agency who have contacted a number of agencies on her behalf:

***“They always ask the worker to pass the telephone to me. When they hear that my English is not fluent (though I can communicate and I can understand English) they are making excuses and saying ‘can you drive?’ to find a reason for not employing me. They have got a lot of excuses for refugees. They want three-four years of experience, and they want references. But I need the job for survival. I have family back home, I have children at home with my husband so I am desperate to work. I thought cleaning is something I can do if I am not allowed to be a midwife, but I meet the barrier every time.”*”**

Voluntary work as an alternative

The research reports reviewed earlier suggested that volunteering can be a positive experience to improve English, and may lead to paid work, and some people in our study had considered this alternative (see also under Routes into work). However these other studies emphasised that voluntary work is positive so long as it is carried out in moderation. Where it is prolonged and done to excess it can have very negative effects on mental and emotional health. This view is rather superficial, and although we do not dispute these findings of other research, we argue that the issues are more complex than can be captured by quantitative studies. We attempt to unpick some of these complexities here.

First, some (but not all) participants in our study agreed that doing voluntary work is a good thing, so long as it leads to paid work eventually. Some refugee advice agencies had made direct contact with voluntary organisations such as Oxfam, to arrange work experience for their service users. They recognised that this gives good experience, develops communication skills and in particular gives practice in the English language. There was a general feeling that if people have sorted out their other problems, they might consider voluntary work for a day a week alongside a paid job. However it would be wasting time to do it for a whole week, but some felt coerced into it. There was a very strong feeling amongst all the participants that voluntary work was no substitute for waged work. In seeking paid work in their own profession, people were offered voluntary work, with no guarantee that it would lead to paid work. We heard of nurses and doctors who

approached a hospital for work, and were told, 'you can do voluntary work. After that if you're good enough and qualified enough you might get other work. Meanwhile we cannot accept you here'. In some ways such a situation can be more of a frustration than an asset, where people are allowed close to their professional area but forbidden from making a direct contribution. The question for them is whether it is an advantage to be 'known' and to be seen to be willing to keep links with their profession, or whether maintaining distance from their field would be less stressful. Whatever way it is regarded, volunteering has many disadvantages as well as rewards.

One must also take account of this in cultural terms. In Britain there is a tradition of formal voluntary work where there is no expectation of payment. This is not a familiar concept for people from some other cultures, who although they may work for their communities in an unpaid capacity, it is not formalised in the same way, and it is not seen as an alternative to paid work, nor is it seen as 'voluntary work' in the British sense. All of the people we interviewed saw work in exchange for wages as a fundamental human need, and found it difficult to understand:

- (i) why someone should get paid without having worked for it (hence their reluctance to accept the £10 expenses offered them at the interview),
- (ii) and why someone should work without wages: 'I haven't looked for voluntary work. I don't like doing that. I work for money – money paid into a bank account'.

In terms of perceptions of voluntary work, some people told us quite adamantly that they would not take this on, yet as the interview proceeded we discovered that they are working within their own communities, either in a formal or informal voluntary basis. Indeed some people were doing both – running projects and being available day and night to people in trouble. One man, who qualified in psychology in his country of origin, was working as a volunteer in a drop in centre for refugees on a busy urban road. As he speaks five languages he is also called upon frequently, by neighbours and others, to accompany them to hospital, legal or other appointments to act as interpreter. He has been called out in the early hours to deal with situations of racial harassment. He said people from different cultures, religions and ideas are very comfortable with his interpreting because he understands them very easily. Others have the same experience in helping neighbours. One woman who qualified as a paediatrician, is consulted frequently by members of her community who ask for advice about all aspects of their children's medical conditions and developmental progress. They prefer to come to her than to visit the GP. In addition to requiring to undergo English and medical-related examinations in order to practice as a doctor in the UK, she has a small child and does not have close friends who would care for him. She and the others described did not regard this as voluntary work, but as something everyone ought to do to help their neighbours out.

The two people described here are being exploited, since there is a whole raft of statutory services that can only function because they and many others like them are carrying out informal caring and support roles. The fact that for them there is some satisfaction in contributing in a situation where they feel very frustrated is not the point. The toll on their physical and psychological energies is considerable. They may be in demand round the clock, dealing with worried and harassed families facing illness, hostility, financial and immigration-related problems. They themselves may be without personal supports, have their own worries about money, immigration issues and so on, and they are certainly without institutional backing. Although they are contributing actively they can become depressed and exhausted, and often feel unappreciated. The point is that *they are doing jobs that need to be done and that require financial investment*. This 'voluntary work' is appropriate work, and should be rewarded by decent pay.

Retraining

Some people had inquired about retraining in their field, only to discover the cost of such courses is beyond what they could pay. Others are attempting to move sideways, into a related field. An example is a doctor who trained as a gynaecologist who has been in the UK for nearly seven years. She has completed a postgraduate qualification in Health

Promotion and has worked as an adviser to women with health problems. She continues to work as an adviser in a women's project, but has developed an interest in mental health and is taking steps to qualify as a psychiatrist. She has been advised that the field of gynaecology is now saturated and she is unlikely to be able to enter that field here.

Nearly everyone was suspicious of the motives of Job Centres who are often keen for refugees to sign up for courses which may not be of any use to them at the end of the day. Workers there may not be skilled enough to understand individual needs or to give appropriate information. It was thought that this enthusiasm for recommending courses is more to do with returning statistics and ticking boxes than it was concerned with the needs of the individual: Below is a typical sentiment expressed:

“There’s a lot of talk about training and retraining, and how your qualifications aren’t good enough. I mean I was trained by British people all my life – why should anybody question my training now? What are all these qualifications amounting to except frustrations? How qualified must we be in order to get jobs we want to do? It’s such a frustrating process.”

Evidence of qualifications

One of the big problems for refugee and asylum seeker professionals fleeing persecution and civil war is that they are not always able to produce evidence of their qualifications. Not only do documents get left behind or lost on the journey, but also some people have to change their identity, causing other kinds of problems when they arrive in the country of asylum. For example, one man fled his country of origin to a nearby country where he completed his university degree. He worked there for two years, completing the practice aspects of a medical qualification. He returned to his country of origin when the political situation seemed less dangerous for him, but again had to flee. In the process he had to change his name and his date of birth and acquire a false passport. As a result he is not able to claim his degree because it is in another name from the one he currently uses. He started a degree all over again with the Open University in the UK, but found he was unable to sustain it because of the need to work for money, the demands of the voluntary work he was doing in his own community here, and the fact that he is now primary carer for his partner who is chronically ill.

Inappropriate jobs

Some people we spoke to were reluctant to apply for employment outside the refugee advice business because of the treatment they received elsewhere. They were hopeful of finding a job in projects serving minority ethnic communities, particularly asylum support groups where they felt their experience would be appreciated and where they themselves would feel comfortable.

R's story

R had been a secondary school teacher in Zimbabwe. He sustained an injury and is unable to use one of his hands. He has already taken an undergraduate and a higher degree in the UK, and had hoped to get a job in the Civil Service or in an office. He applied to a number of companies in the commercial sector and felt he was being offered work that was demeaning to his abilities. He describes his experience of an insurance firm:

“I explained my medical condition, and thought they would give me work that I could manage, but they behaved as though they did not have that kind of work at all. When I said this manual work is too heavy for me, I can’t continue working in it, because it’s killing me, I realised they actually had jobs elsewhere that were quite suitable for someone with my condition. And when I went there for the first time, I realised there were only white people working in that job. And in that very difficult job they had assigned me to do, they were almost all black people, and I felt that it was really unfair to be in that situation.”

“I also went to another company where I was referred by the Job Centre, and when I went to the interview I was the only black person. I then began to wonder whether there are no other black people who are qualified.”

This treatment leads people not to want to work in the private sector, or indeed in any sector of the economy where they think they will encounter racism. R was advised by his friends to seek an organisation that works with people from different countries. This appealed to him also because he felt he would be able to put something back directly to the people who had helped him. At the time of the interview he was still unemployed, and having gone for a number of interviews in the private sector, he had become adept at recognising that ‘I don’t have a chance here’. R’s position about wanting to work in a setting where he felt accepted and respected in the voluntary sector, was not reflected in the views of many others in the study, although we did interview several who were associated with refugee organisations either as workers or volunteers. Our impression is that all the study participants including R would prefer to have a choice of work across private and public sectors, but felt safer in settings that explicitly welcomed refugees and asylum seekers as workers.

Conclusion

The refugees discussed here are people whose skills are currently in demand in the British economy. Instead of facilitating a quick and smooth process into work, the system has created a number of barriers that many professionals find insurmountable. All of the professionals we spoke to are keen to work, and their greatest desire is to practice in the areas for which they have been trained. They were all facing obstacles to achieving this, to the extent that it seems certain that qualified people appear to have more difficulties in finding appropriate work than those without qualifications. The difficulties relate to acceptability (and sometimes the availability of evidence) of qualifications, the costs and time implications of reorienting to UK expectations and the level of proficiency in English demanded. Even when they are able to overcome these barriers, there is no guarantee of a job at the end.

There is also the problem of finding UK experience. Unrelated work is often all that is available, so they become increasingly alienated from their professional area and their skills and knowledge become outdated. Professional organisations are able to help, but this is patchy, often expensive and time consuming. In addition some people have left their documents in their country of origin, or have changed their identity, so they have no proof of their qualifications. There appear to be no mechanisms that might examine a person’s claim to have qualifications without requiring them to retrain.

We learned that a number of these professionals are being exploited in that they are working in their areas of expertise without payment. The other side of this coin is if they are disallowed in pursuing their profession legitimately, there is no formal protection for patients in their practising outside the regulations of the law and professional organisations. A response to this situation must include timely intervention and investment of resources, both of which will lead to supporting qualified people into work and to drawing desperately needed skills into the economy.

Recommendations

4. The NWDA, together with its partners, should develop a strategy to enable the best use of qualified and skilled refugees to meet skill shortages in the Northwest. This should include not only assisting refugees to go into the same job as they previously held in their home country but also consideration as to how skills could be transferable to similar professions where there are skill shortages.
5. All agencies supporting refugees into employment should be made aware of the role of UK NARIC and UK NRP in recognising qualifications, and of the existing routes into work for qualified refugees.
6. Provision should be made, in areas of skill shortage, to develop more straightforward routes for appropriately qualified and skilled refugees into work, building on, for instance, the work being done with refugee doctors. This provision could include: paying the fees for transitional courses and the process of recognition by professional and trade organisations; and developing the opportunities for placements and voluntary work in appropriate work settings; and providing a living wage for people whilst they are studying (it should be borne in mind that it is estimated to cost £6000 to retrain a refugee doctor and £220,000 to train a UK medical student).
7. Professional organisations should be approached with a view to ensuring that the entrance requirements are at an appropriate and justifiable level and for their assistance in developing routes into employment in that profession. Specifically refugee doctors thought that the level of English required was set at a level higher than that required of UK students.
8. There is a need for more creative solutions whereby refugees, who are unable to provide evidence of their qualification, often for the very reasons that led to them being a refugee, can demonstrate their skills and knowledge.

8 The role of English

Introduction

As noted in the literature review, all the research identifies lack of English language as a central problem for refugees seeking employment. On a commonsense level it makes sense that anyone seeking work in a new country should be competent in the language. There were people in the study for whom in a straightforward way, communication in English was a problem and improvement was a priority for most people in this situation interviewed. We were also told about others who because of communication difficulties are unaware that they could attend a course to improve their English. Publicity regarding such courses was said to be poor, so some people remained uncertain about how they could progress in this respect.

However, although nearly everyone said the lack of English language was one of the major obstacles to getting work, further discussion revealed that, as with volunteering, this is more complex than simply not being able to speak the language.

Colloquial English

A number of people had learned English in their country of origin – they are already familiar with the basic rules of the language and with grammar, so they do not need to be taught formal aspects, but need practice in everyday talk, and in understanding local accents. Often there is no opportunity for this as they are confined to their own communities (sometimes even when they do have a job). We met people who have no problems reading and writing in English, and who welcomed the interview for this research because it was an opportunity for them to practice. Some of these people are attending courses in English, but are frustrated because such courses are not geared to their needs. We cannot emphasise too strongly the strength of feeling about the inappropriateness of the training in English that is on offer. One woman said she attends a course for three hours every week, but in order to learn what she needs for everyday communication, has to find her practice elsewhere:

“When I came here my understanding was good, but I needed practice, meeting and talking with people... at home I sometimes speak English with my husband and my son, who speaks good English through school.”

Other people said similar things - they learned English from speaking with friends, partners and others they are in contact with on a daily basis and gained very little from classes. The overwhelming consensus was that English classes are of limited value, and need to be much more sensitive to people’s needs. This is confirmed by Bloch’s research, which made a number of recommendations acknowledging the range of needs of refugees related to English language development (Bloch, 2002). One man dealt with the problem of inappropriate English classes thus:

“I stopped going to classes because they gave me a headache. I don’t feel good in them. I learn in my home much better. I speak to myself. I explain to myself. I have a book, and I watch the TV. I listen to radio. I translate the newspaper because I have a dictionary. Then I don’t have a headache and I learn better. I have been in this country two years, and although I don’t have any answer (about refugee status) I have now learned the language, though my English is still not good.”

What level of English?

Another dimension of the problem (discussed also in Chapter 7) was a concern among professional people particularly that the level of English required to practice in the UK has been set at too high a level, resulting in delays in completing the process into professional employment. The clearest example of this is the position of doctors, and all those in the study expressed frustration at the level required.

“In the Cambridge exam I got 6.5 in the English exam. For university entrance here you need 5.5 band or 6 band, but for doctors they want 7 band, so they are a bit strict. I do not intend to go for the English exam, because in Iran I studied medicine in English and read medical books in English – medical terminology – in English so I was ready for the medical exams when I came here two years ago. But the problem for me is 7 score is a bit strict, especially for refugee doctors...they had to go out of their country in an emergency way, so they had no time to make up their English in their own country. Here they find it difficult because of other stresses, and studying English takes a very long time. If GMC asked for 6 band or 6.5 band, it will save us something like one or two years study – just in English. And of course medicine is very forgettable, so we feel some frustration, we are worried that we will forget medicine. “

However there were other examples of people's concerns about appropriate supports:

“Support in the language has to come first of all. The more speaking courses you take the better – speaking, not writing. They always say grammar is important, but first speaking is important. Here in England not everybody speaks good grammar – OK grammar is important, but first speak better. There is too much focus on grammar in the courses. In formal places like a restaurant of course people speak good grammar, but not always, not everybody, not even English people.”

Is English the real issue?

For some jobs that do not involve contact with the public for example, good English is not required, but it was reported to us that people are still not getting the jobs. There were a number of stories of this sort. A woman, who is not fluent in English but communicates adequately, has been looking for a job as a cleaner. She has been to a number of different employment agencies, and reports that whenever they learn she is not fluent in the language, tell her that fluency is necessary. She has started to attend classes to improve her English. Time and again it was reported to us that this was given as the main obstacle in finding a job.

One might argue that any job in an English-speaking country requires proficiency in the language, but the significance of the above story becomes clearer when one recognises that poor English is also cited as the reason for refusing jobs to others whose ability to speak English is not in doubt. A man who was a lecturer in languages in Somalia, who graduated from European universities and who speaks fluent English, French and Italian, is working as a bilingual support worker in a primary school. His belief is that he had met discrimination in the UK on grounds both of age and country of origin: 'they are looking for young people who are English... there are lots of things like this going on, especially for people who are educated'. A woman interviewed in Bolton is fluent in French and English and was a translator and proof reader in her country of origin. In Liverpool we met a woman with excellent spoken English who has been in the UK for six years and who worked as a secretary in her country of origin. She has completed training as a classroom assistant and has a NVQ Level 2. She works as a volunteer in a women's centre and in a school crèche. She has applied for numerous jobs as a classroom assistant, and despite having been interviewed, has not been successful at all in finding paid work. The reasons given to her inevitably include her level of English. She has now started a foundation course, which she will attend part-time for a year, and hopes this will get her into university to train as a teacher. She is left asking, 'Why is this? Am I wearing too many clothes, or is it the kind of clothes I wear? Is it because of my name when I phone up about jobs?' She knows very well that her English is more than adequate. It seems that people are encouraged to collect qualifications, which when they produce them are always 'not quite enough'.

The large number of people who took part in the study whose English is excellent but who were still unable to find a job, raises suspicions of racism and prejudice at work rather than the problem lying with actual skill of the refugee. People who applied for one job were offered another (an applicant for a job as insurance salesman was offered a manual job; someone who applied for a job as a waiter in a restaurant was offered a job in the kitchen). Some of these people were told their English was not yet good enough. One of them has completed two degrees at UK universities and was not prepared to accept the menial jobs on offer.

This discrimination appears to happen at both formal and informal levels. At a formal level, we have already discussed refugees' concerns about the level of English required to practice as a doctor in the UK, set above university entrance level, and at a more informal level there is a distinct impression amongst many refugees that their level of spoken English is often used as a smokescreen to cover a reluctance to employ people of minority ethnic origin generally, and refugees in particular. We were told, 'they use poor English as an excuse not to give a job'. The lengths to which the institutionalised assumption that 'refugee' is interchangeable with 'poor English' can be taken, is illustrated by the experience of one woman who was being interviewed by a Job Centre interviewer. After 15 minutes of the interview had passed, both speaking in English, the interviewer asked 'Do you speak English?' On another occasion the interviewer asked the asylum seeker's small daughter if she could translate for her mother, even though it was clear the woman's English was good. The daughter replied that her mother 'speaks perfect English'. In both instances the refugees involved told their stories with a sense of wry humour at the rigidity and stupidity of the questions, but were aware of the more sinister undertones. Given that we live in a country where racism is acknowledged to be institutionalised, and where the press, government rhetoric, and popular beliefs have resulted in a moral panic about refugees and asylum seekers, it is not unreasonable to conclude that racism informs the messages refugees are given about their adequacy in spoken and written English, and therefore their capacity to work.

In some situations one can only speculate about the role racism plays in decisions employers and others make about the adequacy of a person's level of English, given the subtlety of the operation of racism in many instances. It is certainly a convenient and very expedient explanation for refusing work to applicants. At the same time, to formalise an acceptable level of English might work to the disadvantage of refugees and asylum seekers, since they might miss out on many jobs where English language proficiency is not required.

It was suggested by some respondents that employers could set up schemes where they take on a percentage of refugees and train them in the job along with the language, so that people are learning English alongside the job, rather than having to do one first and then the other. This would cut down the length of time refugees have to wait to find work, and would ensure that courses in English are designed to fit with the needs of the economy:

“There aren't any schemes that do that (train people for a job alongside language training), and I find that sad, because people are going on English courses, but at the end of the day it's a dead end. I don't think a lot of communities are aware of that. So they're doing the courses, and that's fine, that's great, it's all about self-development, but what's the result? Courses should be designed according to people's needs and with the job market. But everybody has to do English, everybody has to do computers, everybody has to do this and that. For heaven's sake, the needs of the people – I mean if somebody was a teacher before, can we have a course to get them back into teaching if we can.”

Such schemes would no doubt have a part to play in the variety of responses needed to help refugees into work. That employers should play a part in this assumes good will on their part, and indeed there are examples of employers having taken initiatives to this end. Moreover, the Government could give a clear signal to employers generally, if the level of English required for doctors could be reduced. Nevertheless there are without doubt more fundamental problems that have

led to reluctance to employ refugees under any circumstances. Employers may be required to be more accountable for the decisions they make in respect of this, perhaps through invoking equal opportunities and race equality legislation.

Conclusion

It is in the area of English language that deep-seated prejudices and racist attitudes amongst employers and public bodies are most clearly manifested. Although other research has identified English as a problem for refugees in finding work, we found that the issue is not simply about not knowing the language. Some people had learned English in their country of origin, and needed practice in listening to different accents and talking to local people. Others speak fluent English, but were told it is 'not good enough'. We suspect that 'English' is a convenient excuse for employers not to give work to refugees, and believe that they should be made accountable for decisions concerning refugee applications for work, perhaps using race equality legislation. These attitudes are institutionalised in that the level of English required for some jobs is often higher than for university entrance, carrying assumptions that equate 'refugees' with 'poor English'. These assumptions also need to be challenged.

Recommendations

9. There needs to be improvements in the way that English is taught including: better publicity of existing courses; greater opportunities for refugees to practice English outside the classroom; a concentration on speaking English rather than learning grammar; and English courses linked to the vocations that refugees wish to pursue.
10. Employers and other agencies supporting refugees into employment need to develop methods by which they can accurately assess the level of English required to do a job and the level of English that the refugee has.
11. Employers should be encouraged to develop "on the job" training that includes learning the English necessary to carry out the job, building on existing examples of good practice.

9 Routes into work

The study examined the process of applying for jobs – how people heard about them, completing application forms and attending interviews. As a background to this, the findings of the study suggest that some national groups are disadvantaged by stereotypes of them, especially people of Asian origin. Although this was not a widely expressed opinion, it is worth mentioning as an insight into possible attitudes of employers. The quote below gives a flavour of the concern:

“English people think if you are a refugee you are free and you are very relaxed. They think we are rich, that we all have money that comes from somewhere. But they don’t think that many of us want a job. They think we don’t want to take advantage of work. I think it’s very, very bad. But if they know how we live here, and we have a struggle for everything, everything - for example, neighbours, language, friends, job, Home Office, information – everything. But most people don’t know this.”

It was suggested that such beliefs result in an unsympathetic approach to refugees, from both employers and members of the public, and is an obstacle in their getting a fair opportunity to find work.

Against this context, the circumstances of those we interviewed varied widely in that some had come here comparatively recently and had worked in their country of origin, whilst others had been in the UK for most of their adult lives. Their experiences were not dissimilar. We discuss these separately.

Those who have worked in their country of origin

We did not meet anyone who had not worked before they came to the UK (unless they had been too young to work). Their experience of being out of work is different from an understanding of 'long-term unemployed' in the usual sense, since they were people who had worked, then had become long-term unemployed when they came to the UK. Some of them had children who are now also facing long-term unemployment.

Everyone we met was willing to work, and there are stories of success for some of them in finding work, and of an ongoing struggle for others. Most of the interviewees told us they would take any kind of work. We met some people who have found jobs they are happy with. They were a minority, and in the main people without qualifications or training, who are pleased to be independent and no longer on NASS or other benefits. Most of them gained jobs through people they know in their own community, and in most cases they were not required to complete an application form or to produce references. The issue of references is a very real one for refugees and asylum seekers, often unable to produce such testimonials, or having references from their country of origin which are often discounted in Britain. Where there was an interview it appears to have been cursory and informal. This was the case for many who were in unskilled work.

Most people we interviewed were aware of the importance of completing application forms in a way that makes the most of their attributes, and that presents their skills and qualifications in ways that are appropriate to the job. Only one person said he was confident in completing applications and knew precisely what was required. He had been an English teacher and is currently at university in the UK. Some said the application form was so basic that they had no problems completing it. Nevertheless the majority who had completed application forms had received help from either their friends or from link or support workers.

Nearly everyone we interviewed was aware that how they presented themselves and their skills was an important element in applications, and that it was not always possible to predict what might be regarded as negative or positive factors. This is illustrated by the experience of one man who had been applying for factory jobs:

“When they ask me ‘What can you do? Can you do jobs wrapping and packing?’ I tell them I can do painting, driving...Then I know they are saying we do not want this person. So now if I go to your factory and you ask me what can you do, can you do wrapping and packing, I say Yes, because maybe I missed the job because I said I can do too much, and maybe they would have to pay me more. So I say, just packing and wrapping. This is better for me.”

In this case it was clear to the refugee that he should not present himself in the best light, and make the most of the higher skills he possessed. He must discern the level of skills required, and pitch his application towards that exactly. He surmised that potential employers would anticipate that if they employed him, soon he would be looking for promotion and a higher income. As a consequence he felt obliged to play down any skills other than those that were stated as necessary.

The finding that some people who come to the UK without formal qualifications may be more likely than qualified people to find a job they are prepared to accept, is confirmed by other research (DWP, 2003). However the research does not go on to show that even then workers may have to under-emphasise ability, rather than make the most of it, an expectation of other UK job seekers. It is a belief in most communities that if people want to take them up, cleaning and low paid jobs are easy to get. This belief seems to be borne out by the experience described above. However the pay is low, and those we spoke to in such work saw it as a basis from which they could move on as quickly as possible. Its value was to give them experience and the possibility of references to get them into better paid work. At the same time, there is a suggestion here that employers may have an investment in denying them better-paid jobs, unless that is, they are able to move to another company.

Skilled workers

However there were others working in unskilled jobs who had come to this country with training in a trade. P is aged 24 and his experience is typical of them:

“I have a job packing salad in a factory. At home I was an iron-turner. I have qualifications in this that I had to leave behind. For this job, my friend worked in the factory. He brought the application form and I filled it in. No one helped me with this – I wrote my name and NI number. I went to the interview and I said I had no experience, but I want to work. Experience didn’t matter because you get trained for the packing job. I am going for one week to training. I went to the Job Centre and they found me a job at £4 per hour. I didn’t take it because I need more money for paying my house. Now I have worked for three months, and before that I went to college to learn English and computer. I have a certificate for English. This packing job is not one I want to continue doing. I can do everything in iron turning. This job will give me references so I can move on.”

P said he had already inquired about how he might get into iron turning in this country, and has discovered that through the Job Centre he can be found a job in this trade, that although not paid well, will give him work for six months (possibly a ‘New Deal’ scheme). He will attend a course for six months, which he says will give him experience in this country, and after that is hopeful it will lead to a permanent job in his own trade. He is clearly someone with initiative and patience who is prepared (or perhaps recognises that he has no choice) to start again at the bottom in the hope of making progress. Like other employed unqualified or skilled workers we interviewed, P had no interest in voluntary work. They were all intent on earning money with the hope of settling in this country and establishing their independence. They had made friends in their places of employment and were clearly focused on integration. Perhaps they have lower expectations of what they might do, and may be prepared to accept minimal wages. Amongst those with a trade we found a number prepared to take anything offered, seeing it as a beginning, a foot on the ladder, that they could build upon over time.

V's Story

V is 29 and single. He has been in the UK for 4 years and now has ELR. In Iraq he was a washing machine mechanic. He had 'on the job' training for this, but has no formal qualifications. After permission to work was given, he couldn't find a job for over a year. Eventually he took a job illegally in a newsagent's, where the wages were very low. His boss refused to pay him more. V's friend told him about a sorting job in the Post Office and helped him fill in the application form. He got the job and was paid £4.20 an hour. He worked there for 6 months, but again the wages were too low. Then two months ago another friend told him about a job as security officer in a supermarket chain. His friends helped him to fill in the application form. He had three interviews, and though he felt he had not performed very well, he got the job. He was given training, earns £5.06 an hour and considers that he has good prospects. He feels he has been treated fairly, has good opportunities to improve his spoken English, has acquired a council flat, a girlfriend, and a number of other friends where he works. He hopes to persuade the immigration authorities that he deserves to be granted permanent residence. Although he has not been able to pursue his original trade (and has no plans to go back to it), with hard work and diligence he sees a future for himself here. He was extremely enthusiastic about the job and his prospects.

University/professionally educated people

Not everyone is prepared to pursue this route. We found the majority of professionally educated people unprepared to accept menial work. Some of them were very angry that their skills were going to waste. They are largely people in their 40s and 50s who are older than P, have trained in their country of origin over comparatively long periods and have wide experience in their field. They have come from jobs with high social value which they have discovered are not open to them here and so have greater difficulty, unless they are prepared to accept low status work.

A common experience related to us, discussed earlier, and a source of frustration for a number of people is one where a refugee or asylum seeker is barred from working in the profession they have chosen and for which they have been trained. Some of them have applied for jobs related to their profession, but without success. A number of those we met who were working, were in advice work primarily, as a compromise between unskilled work and their professional area.

For those who have started at the bottom, progress have been painful and slow, and in the process original skills have been lost, as in the example below.

F's story

F is an example of someone who claimed asylum whilst he was in the UK as a student several years ago. It has taken him nearly ten years to arrive at a job where he is happy, although it was not one he had sought originally. Now aged 49, he completed his first degree in Sudan and worked there for two years in a government department. He completed a MSc in economics in Britain. After he applied for asylum he got a job as a security guard, which he held for five years. During this time he applied for jobs in the council and in the voluntary sector, but found it difficult to get into the system because he said people treat you as a foreigner and the accent puts people off, however good your English is. He thought too his experience from Sudan was not valued. He considers these experiences as manifestations of racism and found that 'it degrades you, chips away at your self-confidence... when I first came to this country I had lost a job back home and my first concern was my safety, but when I settled down I wanted to have a good job like any other person'.

During this time he did voluntary work with refugee support groups and other organisations supporting minority ethnic groups. Eventually he got a job as an advice worker in a health project, where he stayed for two years before the funding ended. *contd*

For over a year he worked as a cab driver, a horrible experience where he was attacked and insulted on a daily basis. He was exploited by the cab agency as they provided inadequate support such as a warm waiting cabin or security measures. He believes this treatment was because they knew he was not able to get another job. After 15 months he gave this up as his family life was affected by the shift work he had to do.

F has continued to do voluntary work throughout the time he has been in the UK, because he says he would rather spend his time with his community than in any other way. He has been involved in different voluntary and community organisations in different capacities such as worker, management committee member, activist. Three years ago he got a paid job as a volunteer coordinator, which he kept for a year before having to leave because of personal problems. A year later he started working as an advice support worker and has been in this job ever since. He would never consider applying for a job in the private sector as he feels companies there are reluctant to accept foreigners due to a 'laddish' culture and the expectation that their staff will join in on visits to the pub.

He says the voluntary work helped him get an insight into how the voluntary sector works, and in turn he was able to be more selective about the type of jobs to apply for, the type of skills demanded, aspects of his career to highlight, and significantly, what to hide (his work as a security guard and cab driver for example). In his words, he learned to 'market himself', and now feels he could get a job anywhere.

If people such as F had been treated appropriately and their knowledge and skills drawn into the economy at an early stage, they could have made a very different contribution to this country. For them as individuals, being forced to take up unskilled work meant precious time was lost for them. Those who have achieved jobs in their original or a new profession are an important role model for others in their communities, and are in a position to share information that will encourage others to move on from low paid and low status jobs.

There were one or two exceptions to the trend that professionally qualified people were always unhappy with work regarded as less acceptable given their qualifications. C was a teacher in a high school in Kabul and was given ELR four years ago, He has been working for one year. He says:

"I was working as a teacher for more than 15 years in Afghanistan. I have not applied for a teaching job because I realise that my English is very poor. I found my present job with the help of a Pakistani man that I came to know locally. He told me about this factory where they needed machinists and were willing to provide training if required. I went with him there and met the owner. Now I work as a machinist for 16 hours a week and I am so glad I got rid of the JSA (job-seekers' allowance) and having to sign at the job centre all the time. I am happy with my present job. I earn a reasonable amount of money. With tax credits and child benefit I get for my five children, it is enough for me and my family to live a decent life, plus I can save enough to send back to my family in Afghanistan. My employer has promised me that very soon he will be able to offer me a full time job. It was very difficult for me initially to work as a machinist. In Afghanistan this is not considered a man's job. Also, since I was a teacher I had never considered doing this kind of work. Initially I had a lot of problems doing it, but the money I was getting on JSA was not enough even to support my family properly and I desperately needed to send money back to my family in Afghanistan. So I overcame my pride and started to learn a machinist's job seriously. Now I have become quite good at my work and can do very complicated stitching neatly. I wish I could work as a teacher here but I realise that this is not our own country and we have to make the best that we can."

Another example of someone who made the best of her opportunities is S, a twenty four year old Pakistani woman. She has a BA from Pakistan and had planned to study law. She got admission to a law degree at Manchester University and completed a law access course, but was classed as an overseas student, and could not afford to pay the very high fees demanded. She shows a high level of initiative in looking around for anything she could find.

Finally, a number of people in the study found work through their contacts with a refugee advice agency, often directly connected with the work of the project itself, where their skills were recognised and drawn in to support others. The case of S illustrates this. S came to this country with her husband 4 years ago as an asylum seeker from Kosovo. She had been an IT consultant there and was pregnant when she arrived in the UK. She and her husband came under emergency provision and were granted ELR. S's daughter was born three months after the family's arrival. Since then S has had a second child. She is now working as an interpreter for a refugee centre. She said she had not been looking for work, but attended the centre for support. She was approached by a manager who explained that a female interpreter was needed, especially to help with women's medical problems. She said 'It's not what I'm qualified to do. At the time we had lost everything, the job was there, it was a paid job and I just said yes'. She feels she has been treated very fairly, has found local people more than helpful and all the institutions support her family. She says she is sure that if she applied for another job her refugee status would not matter – it would not be a plus or a minus. The reason she has not applied is because she has two small children and this part-time job as an interpreter suits her very well. She does not want to leave the children. 'I am in the same position as any other mother. I have made a compromise. I don't want to leave my children for a career'.

This illustrates that there are possibilities for work for those who come seeking support and not necessarily a job. However this cannot be a major route into work, since refugee projects are limited in the resources they have available. The fact that several people in our research had had this experience reflects the sources of our sample, rather than a general trend.

Those in Britain for most of their adult lives

We want to highlight this group particularly, since they are not typical of the people we interviewed, as they have been in the UK for fifteen years or more and represent an earlier wave of refugees fleeing from countries at war. However they are a group in urgent need of support. We met people of all ages, and were particularly struck by the position of young men who have been through the school system in Britain, speak English, are now in their late teens and early twenties, and whose experience of looking for work has been very negative indeed. In many ways they are reminiscent of other long-term unemployed people, now at a stage where many of them have ceased to look for work. Some of those we interviewed had done sporadic work in factories or in manual jobs, which were short term and often involved long journeys to work. They had found these jobs through friends already working for a company, but at the time of interview none of them was working. They left school without qualifications, feel excluded from society and from their own community, where older people are likely to disapprove of them. Their refugee status means they have a sense of not belonging to a country where they have lived for all of their adult lives, but which they cannot call their own, and their lives appear aimless and alienated. They are frequently in trouble with the police, and there were stories of drugs use, loneliness and hopelessness.

We were told that around 80% of young men in the Somali community in Liverpool for example, are not in jobs. The Somali community lives largely in a particular area of Liverpool that is still presented as problematical. Their address conveys the message that anybody who lives there is not someone employers want to work for them. There is a belief in the community that a person's address and not necessarily their refugee status is the main reason jobs are not offered. So the status of being an 'immigrant' or a 'refugee', raises problems that are compounded by their living in an area with a reputation of notoriety.

We were interested to know whether jobs might be available within their own communities for these young people. There are a number of Somali businesses in Liverpool for example. This is complex in that a number of Somali communities exist, and jobs may be held within each community group. Many of the jobs are in any case heard about by word of mouth, and we were told that young people are seldom told about available work because the communities generally disapprove of them. In any case, working arrangements often depend on informal agreements, and a worker may be sacked if the job is required for say a relative or friend of the owner. We found this to be the case in groups in the Northwest other than Somali communities.

These stories raise questions about the widely held assumption that communities help each other out. Clearly this is done selectively. There are many examples of the erosion of confidence that comes with a sense of rejection. One person said,

“It’s about confidence, it’s about attitude and going out there. And then when you seek a particular job, they’ll say, Oh you’re not fit for that job...People feel like, Wow, what’s wrong with me?”

Our findings suggest that job availability and job security within communities are uncertain and dependent on a number of factors, including the changing personal circumstances of employers, community politics, perceptions of the area by outsiders including employers and the police, all of which make the chances of finding a reasonable job fairly slim. When these are added to young men’s sense of alienation, lack of skills and history of failure in the job market, they can result in serious individual and social problems of chronic proportions. In terms of public health priorities, the Government has expressed concern about the high proportion of young men who end their own lives, amongst whom are refugees and others of minority ethnic origin. If groups such as those described above are not helped specifically, the risks to their physical and mental health are enormous. Indeed we met one young man who had seriously damaged his legs and back as a result of jumping out of a window. The risks also extend to the problems they create within their own communities, and for the wider society.

Volunteering as a route into work

We have discussed voluntary work in detail in the section on Training and Qualifications. We mention it here briefly in relation to its general significance as a possible route into paid work. Opinions varied as to the advantages of this. One woman worked in a charity shop, but stopped because she thought she was not allowed to work as a volunteer. She had not realised that although up until 2002 asylum seekers were disallowed from doing voluntary work, since then they are allowed – indeed are encouraged – to take up voluntary jobs.

Some people interviewed were involved in voluntary work in refugee support projects, and were hoping to find a paid job in such projects as they became available. They felt supported by knowledgeable and sympathetic staff, and confident in their own knowledge of the problems refugees face.

The advantages of working as a volunteer are numerous: it can be a source of references when refugees apply for paid work; it can be a means of practising and improving spoken English; it can be a social outlet to combat isolation, depression and loneliness; it can be a way to gain information about facilities, benefits, resources and jobs available in the locality; and it can promote a sense of contributing to one’s community and society at large.

The disadvantages are that it can be a discouraging experience if it is prolonged and it is no substitute for a decent income. Some people felt they would be wasting precious time by doing voluntary work. Their priority is to get into paid work as soon as possible. The priority for all those not in paid work is to get a job as soon as possible.

Common problems

There were a number of problems that were mentioned repeatedly by refugees and asylum seekers in looking for work, many of which could be overcome where there is the political will to tackle them. We discuss these below.

UK experience

There was much frustration, across all the participants in the study, about the demand from employers for UK experience, and this was seen as a barrier it was difficult to overcome. After all, how can people gain experience if someone will not give them a first job? This can drive people into unsuitable or illegal work. Some may seek voluntary work, which is a way to

get experience and references, but others are reluctant to involve themselves in unpaid work. People who had been in the UK for only a few months were persistently asked for (UK) experience, even where the job was advertised as not requiring experience. Any experience (sometimes extensive) gained outside the UK was dismissed as not relevant to circumstances here. Even in situations where it might be argued that experience was directly relevant to a particular job application, such as working in an Asian restaurant, the status of refugee or asylum seeker often led employers to decline to offer a job.

Below is a sample of some of the views expressed:

“The majority of people with permission to work are looking for jobs in for example restaurants, general work in factories, or something like that. This is all they can do, because they don’t have experience of something else. But it is difficult. When someone is going for a job in a restaurant they need to have skill to talk to customers in English. When you apply you are asked ‘Have you ever worked in a restaurant before?’ and you need to start from zero. No one will accept you starting from zero. That’s the main problem.”

“Sometimes they want three years, four years previous experience. We phoned one that said ‘No experience is required. Full training will be given’. It’s a cleaning job, but when they hear her English is not so good they say ‘Sorry for that, we need that’.”

“If someone applies for a job as a waiter, they don’t accept them as a waiter. They send them to the kitchen, to just wash the floors and the plates, and they pay them less.”

Ni number/bank account

A significant number of people were confused about getting a national insurance (NI) number. Some thought they had to wait a long time and therefore could not take up a job until it was issued, or that if they find a job through the Job Centre, they cannot take it because they do not have a NI number. In fact an emergency NI number can be issued quickly to allow someone to start working.

A real problem, which we heard from several people, is responding to demands from potential employers for proof of address and access to a bank account, and in some cases the end result was that jobs have been lost because of the complications involved in this. The quote below illustrates this:

“I applied for a job as a care assistant. The first thing was they wanted proof of my address. I offered them my immigration papers but this wouldn’t do, I needed to show that I pay bills. But I can’t show these because I am living with my friend. Then I was asked for bank details, so I went to the bank and they said ‘bring proof of your address’. So we are going round in circles. I have to bring a water bill or something like that. So my friend has to phone up to change the name on the water bill to at least solve the problem of the bills and the bank. There are a lot of complications. But I did not get the job in the end.”

Potential employers’ responses

When asked about their views as to why they were unsuccessful in job applications, several people were sure it was because they were asylum seekers or refugees. They speculated that employers were unsure what this meant for working legally and so were not prepared to risk offering a job. It was also suggested that employers are worried that an employee might be moved by the authorities to live somewhere else, or even deported, so the investment of training for the job will have been wasted. The refugees’ responses to these difficulties were on the whole one of understanding them, but also profound frustration that they could not be resolved.

There were stories of people having felt cheated by employers. A man from DRC recounted his community's beliefs about employers:

“Many employers pay agencies to find workers, but having paid agencies, they are unwilling to pay the workers, so they tell the workers they have to pay taxes to the Government, and as a result they take more money off them. People in my community believe these employers do not pay the money to the Government, but keep it, so people are being paid less than they should be getting and the employer is pocketing the money. Also, because people from DRC do not know the rules they get paid less than other workers.”

Certification/references/police checks

One of the disadvantages of government policies of 'lifelong learning' is that the expectations of employers are growing, to insist that everyone has to have certification of some training they have completed after leaving school. We heard from people who had applied for what they had thought were jobs not requiring certification, and had not been advertised as such, for example hospital assistant or work in care homes, only to be told they had to go and acquire some certification (NVQs, Access certificates or equivalent) before they would be considered. We met some people who had in fact gone on related or specific courses for a particular job, arranged through Job Centres, but who had not yet found work:

“The computer course was good for me. I spent seven hours every day at the computer over one week. And some people found a job when they completed the course. They got good money and they got everything, but I couldn't. Those who found a job were English people. They didn't have a problem about language, they have information about everything, and maybe somebody supports them, but we don't.”

Z came to this country from Afghanistan where she had been a nurse. She applied for jobs that ranged from the care sector (housing for elderly people), to hospital work, to factory work. She said she was offered a lot of interviews, but eventually realised it was not worth her while to attend them, because always she was asked for some certification:

“I had lots of interviews but I didn't go, because they always ask if I have certificates bring them to the interview. If I haven't, go to a course to get them, or Access course maybe, and then bring back the certificate. They do not always ask that you should bring certificates, but I know they will want them. This means I would have to go on a course for six months maybe. I did go on a special course for the hospital job, and I stayed for seven months, but I became ill and was not able to finish it, so I got no certificate.”

Elsewhere we have discussed the obstacles faced by professional people who have left behind evidence of their qualifications, or who have changed their identity and do not have documentation in their new name. So on a number of fronts the demand for certification can become a tyranny and a frustration for people seeking work.

Linked to this, requests for references were another problematic area for refugees and asylum seekers. Some employers seemed to have no idea of the complications for refugees of acquiring references, and it was said even when they knew applicants had not had a job in the UK, these were still demanded:

“Everyone asks ‘Have you got references? How can she have references? She has only just come to the UK, how can she get references? Sometimes they ask, can she drive? They have got a list of excuses for refugees.”

Some jobs have a legal requirement that employees have police checks before taking up jobs. This is especially important in work with vulnerable groups such as children. Jobs in the civil service and other government settings require all workers to undergo police checks. The overwhelming majority of asylum seekers cannot provide a record of convictions, or any evidence that they have none. This excludes them from a wide range of possible work, including work in crèches and nurseries, classrooms, aspects of social care, as well as a number of areas of professional work such as teaching. Thus the range of feasible jobs is narrowed considerably.

As the discussion above and the quotes that accompany it illustrate, there was a strong feeling amongst the refugees and asylum seekers that they are going round in circles and being blocked on every initiative they make. They were bewildered because they have permission to work, they are willing to work, yet one obstacle after another is being placed in their path to prevent them from working.

Illegal working

No one we interviewed was prepared to say that they were working illegally at present, but a few young men said they had worked illegally in the past, one because he had not been aware that he was breaking the law and whose benefit was withdrawn as a result, and others because they were in desperate need of an income. When potential employers realise they are asylum seekers and are desperate, they may take advantage, and asylum seekers can be exploited as a result. Moreover people who do not speak English well, and cannot get a regular job for this reason, may be forced into working illegally and therefore in a position of vulnerability. Exploitation consisted mainly of being paid less than the minimum wage - £75 per week for office work for someone with a degree from her country of origin and computer skills; £2.50 an hour in a restaurant. It was said that some employers do not know the law, and tell workers if they do not like what they are being paid, they should go home. It was also said that some employers take on refugees for long hours, but show fewer hours on official records. In this way they can appear to be paying at least the minimum wage. The general view was that employers anticipate that there will be too many problems associated with asylum seekers to employ them legally. It is much easier to use their skills informally. The result is continued uncertainty, risk and a meagre income. There seem to be few measures available for the protection of these people.

A 37-year old Afghan woman who has been in the UK for over two years and who has never worked in this country gave this view:

“Mostly people from the Afghan community find it very difficult to find legal work because they know very little English. Also the general belief is that every Afghan is a terrorist and therefore even when someone from our community has the language and other required skills, employers are reluctant to hire them. Therefore most Afghans are doing illegal or ‘black’ work. As a result they get paid very low wages as the employers exploit their situation. Also most Afghans are supporting large families back home due to the poverty and lack of jobs in Afghanistan and even Pakistan, and this forces the persons here to accept any job available and at any wage offered. Also we have heard that the Government intends to send back Afghans even if they have leave to remain. Therefore everyone is trying to make and save as much money as possible, doing whatever work is available, and they are not interested in long term career planning. Also my children get a lot of bullying in school due to being from Afghanistan. I wish people realised we are not Taliban but were their victims.”

Several people saw the answer to illegal working as the Government straightforwardly offering work permits. Here is one example:

“I cannot say lies, everywhere asylum seekers are working in factories. They are working and they get benefits. They are working for £20 a day. They don't have work permission. I think the Home Office must give a work permit to everybody. Otherwise they have to work in 'black' work. If you give work permit, or if you do not give work permit – they are working, and if they are working 'black' they do not pay tax. If they give a work permit, more people would pay tax.”

Here some of the pressures on people in refugee communities are illustrated. Forced to take illegal work, with anxieties of being discovered and the consequences, they are aware of the suspicion with which they are viewed. The combination of low wages, the obligation to send money home and the need to save for their own uncertain future, results in a reluctance to make any plans for training for a UK based job. Add to this worries about children's treatment in school, and a generally hostile environment, and it is not difficult to capture the atmosphere of powerlessness, insecurity and despair surrounding many refugees, even those granted permission to remain in the UK.

Conclusion

A striking finding of the study has been the refugees'/asylum seekers' willingness and desire to work. Everyone in the study, to a person, had a deep desire to find employment. Those who had come here as adults, had all worked in their country of origin, but felt discriminated against in the job market. Those who had come here as children were also disadvantaged, in the education system as well as in the job market. They had grown up in disadvantaged areas, attended poor schools and had not acquired any qualifications in a trade or through higher education. The alienation they experience from society and from their own communities was palpable. Yet they too said they would like to work, and some of them had had short term, low paid jobs. They are a group in need of urgent investment.

As for the rest, the most important source of finding work was through word of mouth and contacts within their own refugee groups. The work, largely unskilled, was seen as a valued opportunity to build experience and to achieve independence, and those we interviewed in this position were optimistic, confident and with a sense of security. This suggests that refugee projects are worth supporting, because they know something of the background and needs of those seeking work, have access to them and are able to match them with appropriate jobs. The work they do seems much more productive than that carried out by Job Centres and other state agencies.

Common problems included a lack of the kinds of things that facilitate people into work, including UK experience, access to references, basic certification, police checks, bank accounts, and so on. The fact that there are no specific government schemes for refugees and asylum seekers that would take account of their particular circumstances, is a big drawback, as is the ignorance of employers who see too many potential problems to risk employing them. It is our belief that the chances of securing work would be enhanced if 'earn and learn' arrangements which included reassurances for employers and accommodations with banks, could be set up to give refugees an opening into the job market. At the same time, even for some of those in work, the uncertainty generated by a belief that they might be sent back to their country of origin, regardless of their refugee status, should not be dismissed, and appears to be not uncommon amongst refugee communities.

Recommendations

12. Employers should be made aware of the benefits of employing refugees and in particular of the potential to solve skill shortages.
13. Employers need to counter the high levels of prejudice that refugees experience through: providing training for their workforce; reviewing their recruitment and selection procedures; and revising equal opportunities policies.
14. Employers need clear guidance on how to assess whether an applicant for a job has permission to work. Specifically it needs to be made clear that a National Insurance number is not required for someone to work legally.
15. Support should be given through refugee community organisations and other refugee service organisations to provide good quality employment advice, and information on rights and entitlements, as these organisations tend to have the best contact with refugee communities. These agencies could also act as a link between refugees and more mainstream agencies that assist people into employment. For this to be meaningful and effective resourcing and training of refugee community organisations will be required.
16. Targeted support should be provided for refugee-run businesses to develop good employment practices.
17. There are a number of bureaucratic barriers that need to be addressed both by Government and/or by employers including: how a relatively recently arrived refugee can be police checked; provision of references when there may be no way to contact previous employers; setting up a bank account when a refugee may not have all the required identity documents.
18. Agencies assisting asylum seekers and refugees into employment should assist entry into good quality voluntary work as a means of getting useful experience, practice of English, training, and references. Very importantly it should, in the main, be seen as a short-term measure both by the employment agencies, the agency providing the voluntary work and the refugee themselves and support given so that the voluntary work is more likely to lead to paid work.
19. Consideration should be given to the development of employment projects targeted at refugee communities where there are very high levels of unemployment among young people who have been in the UK for several years (some were born in the UK) and who have no substantial experience of paid employment.
20. There needs to be further research done into illegal working that avoids further stigmatising asylum seekers, and includes examination of: the psychological impact on workers: why people choose or are forced through destitution into illegal working; links with unsafe business practices; impact on minimum wage; and impact on inclusion and integration.

10 Gender and age related issues

Introduction

It is estimated that women constitute around a third of asylum seekers (Crawley, 2001), but they seldom figure in their own right in discussions about the experiences of refugees. For some, their flight from their country of origin may be because of their political activism, their association with husbands or other relatives considered to be dangerous, or their membership of particular social groups. Often their need to escape is directly the result of gender related persecution including sexual violence and punishment for their not conforming to expectations of women's behaviour. When they arrive in the UK there are also risks for them. We have made reference to their experiences throughout the report, and in chapter 6 we have addressed some of the psychological and physical issues, but their experiences deserve a separate chapter. We discuss some of these in this section.

With regard to age, only six of the people we interviewed were over 40, reflecting the fact that the majority of asylum seekers are young. However the older group did have concerns about the relevance of their age in looking for work, and we discuss this in this section. We deal first with the experiences specific to women.

Women in the study

The range of qualifications, training and experience of the women interviewed varied as much as that of the men, and they all declared themselves willing - and sometimes desperate - to find a job. A number had qualified as doctors, teachers and nurses, and the rest included a chemist, a laboratory technician, an electrical engineer, a hairdresser, a secretary, a fashion designer, a translator and proof-reader, as well as women with no qualifications. Some of them had come to the UK with their children as single mothers, some had come as part of a wider family, others had had to leave their children behind and arrived here alone, and some were single women without children. They faced similar obstacles to those faced by all refugees, but there are significant additional issues concerning their situation, which need to be addressed. As described below, for some there were childcare problems and there were also restrictions on both the kinds of work they felt they could pursue, and the location of such jobs.

Childcare

We were told that in some communities women are not allowed to work (for example in around 50% of Afghan communities). Where women lived in communities that allow them to work (the majority of those represented in the study), the problems associated with childcare was an ongoing theme for all those with small children, and they spoke very powerfully about the consequences of these. Those who worked in advice agencies, women's support groups or other organisations designed to meet the needs of women, often had a crèche on site staffed by qualified workers, where their own children could be looked after all day or after school. Beyond this, both cost and availability were seen as chronic problems.

It needs to be emphasised that work was as important to women as to men, as a key aspect of a positive identity as well as a source of income and a reasonable quality of life, as expressed below:

"I like work, I have worked for about 15 or 16 years in my country. But now I can't because I have a problem finding work and looking after my kids. I don't have enough information. I need more information and help. In my country I went to my office and come home at 6 or seven o'clock. My family is there for the children. I had everything - car, house, job, money - everything. But now I have to start again and there is no help to do this."

Women expressed frustration that their attempts to go to college for training, or to pursue jobs were hampered by a lack of adequate childcare. Some colleges have crèches, but these are not cheap. There was a conviction that if colleges and employers could provide cheap child care facilities; this would make an enormous difference.

“My daughter is 4 years old. She goes full time to nursery, but I used to take her to childcare and I paid 30% of the childcare, and the Government paid 70%. But some people cannot afford this – even going for training classes or English classes, most of the women have got children and they are single mothers who left their husbands back home. They cannot leave the children and unless the children go full time to a nursery the mother needs to stay at home with the child, and there’s problems about lack of childcare. It’s a big problem. Women would be prepared to use a nursery if it was available and affordable.”

This was typical of the concerns expressed. They are of course not confined to women refugees or asylum seekers, and all women wishing to work may face them. One of the differences is that refugees are less likely than women born in this country to have relatives available to help out, or may not have neighbours with whom they can communicate their needs. Where they do not know about or are not eligible to benefit under various family income support policies, or New Deal or Sure Start programmes, they are at a serious disadvantage even compared to other poor and single parent families. Some urgent attention is required for this situation.

Women, men and work

We asked the women whether it is easier for men to find work, than it is for women. The general view was that it is easier for men, because they can work everywhere and they do not look after children or cook. This was expressed as an enormous frustration for women who said they had good jobs and had enjoyed the work they had done in their country of origin, but it was an expectation in this country that men are the earners and women stay at home. They said they liked work, had always worked and had money to spend as a result. Now they find themselves having to start again, a particularly difficult task for a woman who has responsibilities for house and children.

Other research suggests that women from particular (mainly Asian) countries are reluctant to join the labour force because of social convention (Shields and Wheatley Price, 2003). We did hear that this was a problem in some communities (for example in certain Afghan and Pakistani groups), but much less so amongst groups from Iran, Iraq, Somalia or Kosovo. Moreover some women seeking work are not willing, or are not allowed by their husbands, to do every type of job. Women in the focus group said they would not be permitted for religious and cultural reasons, to go where many men are working, such as in a factory, or to work in settings where halal observances are not practiced. They also would not be able to travel long distances away from home. These conditions restrict the kinds of work they could do. There was some indication of changes over the generations. One young woman suggested that her mother’s experience was different from hers:

“Like my mum, she is allowed to work if she wants, and if she can, but she can’t go everywhere, like if she goes to factories, maybe there are lots of men working. She doesn’t go there because my father doesn’t let her. This is for religious and cultural reasons. I do not feel I also need to do this.”

One Afghan woman who had a teaching qualification said she intended to work when her daughter was older. She said:

“I have doubts that I would be able to find work as a teacher because of the experiences of other people from my country. Therefore I will probably work in a factory or somewhere where I can work with women only as my husband would only allow me to work with women only.”

Another woman from Pakistan aged 50 and also a teacher, is working as a machinist in a garment factory, owned by a Pakistani family:

“The working hours are long and the salary is not very good, but I am still happy I have a job. The working environment is decent as most of the machine operators are women and I feel more comfortable working with

fellow Pakistanis as I still do not feel very confident speaking to English people. I was once told that there are jobs in another factory where mostly white people work, that would pay more, but I discussed it with my husband and we decided that the present job is better for me.

Here the particular restrictions felt by women are clear. Many of them feel that even if better-paid work became available, they prefer to or feel obliged to take account of factors that go beyond advancement in pay, conditions or career. The woman described has a great desire to teach as she did in Pakistan, and feels all her experience has been wasted. She was also conscious of the social status attached to being a teacher. As a machinist she no longer has that status, but realises 'this is a foreign country and we as asylum seekers have to be grateful for whatever we can get'.

Health issues

Health problems for both men and women figured prominently in the study, limiting the kind of work they were able to do (see also chapter 6). In the case of women, these of course were compounded by domestic responsibilities. In the women-only focus group none of them had worked since arrival in the UK, though several had qualifications and some of them had completed courses in English and ICT. Some of them said the reason they did not work was primarily because of their ill-health, which included back injuries and gynaecological complications:

"We do have language problems first, and then I think lots of refugee women have health problems because of the journey we come on, and lots of them have many children, and there are also single mothers. All this causes health problems."

Amongst such health problems are issues related to mental health. Some women referred to the stress that results from anxiety caused by long delays in decisions about their asylum applications, waiting for a letter from the Home Office, wondering what the future holds for them and their families, and whether they will be able to stay in the UK. They also have anxieties about money to pay the bills, to buy food and clothes and do the shopping. They worry about being sent back to their country of origin because of the dangers waiting for them there:

"If Home Office or NASS send men back to their country, maybe it's not a problem at all; maybe they can come back again or try another journey. But woman can't because she does not have money, she is in danger all the time. Women come by land from Iran or Afghanistan. That journey is more dangerous, and places a lot of stress on them. Also women are not used to dealing with government officials, so they don't have experience of dealing with bureaucracy and how to fill in forms. So they are more handicapped than men. Single women are particularly vulnerable. They are at more risk."

K's story

K is 41. She arrived from Kosovo four years ago with her husband and children, after most traumatic experiences, from which she still suffers. The family was dispersed to a rural area in Lancashire, and they have been granted ELR. Before getting married K had completed three years of a law degree. She did not complete the degree because of her marriage. Since she arrived in the UK she has not worked and has made little progress in learning English. She says this is one of the reasons she has not looked for a job. Also her husband has poor health as a result of his experiences of war, and she is looking after him. They live on benefits and have little money. K says she has no will to go back to university or to work, because of the experiences she has been through, and the fact that she came to this country because of war at home. She is doing her best with trying to learn the language and is attending a course in English. At the same time she knows the daily contact a job would offer her would be better for her than staying at home. Having a daily obligation would organise her daily routine in a different way.

K's experience reflects the stories of others who still have not recovered from the trauma of war, of leaving home and of arriving in a new culture and country. This is exacerbated by illness in the family, living in poverty, social isolation and loss of confidence. All of these make the concentration and effort needed to learn English more difficult to muster, and the thought of looking for work in these circumstances is a frightening and impossible one. The role of primary carer for sick husbands and small children also prevents any steps in this direction.

Age in the study

Although the study set out to interview people of working age up to 65, in the event the oldest person interviewed individually was 50, and in the focus groups the person who appeared to be the oldest, said he was 55 years. This may reflect the fact that refugees are largely young men, or that older people are not actively seeking work.

There was also an issue about what age some of the interviewees actually were. When asked about their age, some said 'around 40', 'approximately 44' or 'whatever;'. Some people were not sure of their exact age because they do not have birth certificates. Others had changed their age when they came to the UK because they thought they would be more likely to be accepted for work if they claimed they were younger than they actually were. So asking about a person's age is not a straightforward matter.

Older people

Nevertheless, people (who were mainly men) in their forties and fifties said they experienced discrimination in job-seeking because of their age, and in any case the jobs available were manual jobs aimed at younger people. There was considerable anger expressed about age discrimination. Some who had come here with qualifications had considered changing their career totally, but had decided they were too old, and that they might have pursued another field if they had been able to access information before a number of years had passed: 'If I had known at the beginning (eight years ago) the information I've got now, I would have done something else, but I'm too old now (at 43) to start again'.

W is from the Democratic Republic of Congo and is now 50 years old. He studied basic statistics, then engineering statistics at masters level, and worked in research in agriculture and in the office of social demography in DRC. He would like to study for another qualification to be able to work in his specialist area in the UK, and he is keen to integrate into British society. However he feels because of his age this might not be possible. His friends have told him the only way he will get a job is if he is willing to do labouring, but he is adamant he will not do this at his age (or any other age), and although he expressed some optimism towards getting a job when his English has improved, his is a situation where the combination of age discrimination and racism against refugees, may result in another loss of desirable skills to the economy. Yet he is a man of considerable knowledge and skill who could make a very positive contribution to the UK economy.

We met other people who said potential employers had told them that they were too old to work. In one of the focus groups a man aged around 55 who had a degree in law from Afghanistan, said this was the reason he is given frequently, whatever kinds of job he applies for. He said he is now resigned to not getting work in this country.

Young people

Young people also had problems related to their age and their gender. This was the case for young men in particular. In contemporary Britain, stereotypes of young black men lead to beliefs that they will not make good employees and that they constitute trouble of one sort or another. A belief within some communities is that such young people, without work, turn to drugs and get into trouble with the police. Where the young people are of Middle-Eastern appearance, the association in

the public mind is with terrorism, and influences employers not to offer jobs. Some people interviewed were convinced that employers are looking for young people who are (white) English, to fill vacancies, and will pass over applications from people from minority ethnic groups or refugees.

Conclusion

There were particular problems for women in the study. These included childcare arrangements, often unavailable or costly. As in other aspects of people's experience, refugee advice projects were prepared to consider and accommodate the childcare needs of women, and have set up crèches in the agencies. Outside of these, facilities for children proved very difficult. Women also have specific health problems or are caring for disabled or sick relatives, which prevent them looking for work. The consensus is that it is easier for men to find work because they do not have domestic commitments and they can travel to work. Women are sometimes prevented by their husbands from working alongside other men, or travelling a long distance to work. They themselves are sometimes not prepared to take work that contravenes religious or cultural practices. This restricts the range of possibilities, but even where there were no such constraints, jobs open to them tended to be in the low paid service sector. It is important here not to conclude (as Shields and Wheatley Price, 2003 appear to) that women overall are not prepared or are 'reluctant' to work. The reality as we experienced it is more complex than that. All the women we spoke to were seeking jobs, but some required to qualify that ambition in terms of their own preferences or those of their particular community. And all of them felt various degrees of frustration at the problems facing them in the job market.

Age was also considered here. Some people have no documentation about their age. Older people face discrimination. Some of them are professional people who cannot work in their profession. They have considered changing career, but feel too old to do that now. Some of these might have had opportunities to retrain or reorient to jobs in their own profession, but because they had insufficient information missed the opportunity when they were younger. We were struck by the level of anger the discrimination incurred. This experience reinforces our observation that appropriate information at an early stage in the asylum seeking process is crucial if people are to be given a chance to find work here (though this is only one of a number of factors related to age). Young people, especially young men also face discrimination because of stereotypes of black men, or because of their address. There are some groups of young men who have unique circumstances that need appropriate intervention tailored specifically to address their particular needs.

Recommendations

21. Specific initiatives should be developed by and for refugee women to enable them to work which are: culturally sensitive; led by women; acceptable to the communities they are working with; and deal with childcare and health issues.
22. Greater availability of appropriate and affordable childcare and the promotion to refugee communities of existing childcare provision is essential to allow refugee women who have lost their previous support systems to return to employment and education.
23. Assistance should be provided to enable refugee women to develop their own childcare provision and to gain employment in mainstream childcare provision.

11 Support Systems

The refugees have had varying experiences of support, and the overall conclusion of the study is that they depend primarily on people within their own communities who have been in the UK for a longer period than they, to give them information and steer them towards jobs. This includes people who are working in refugee support agencies and projects, and who themselves have come to be very well informed as to resources and opportunities available. This was a more important route than any of the formal systems set up by Government for helping people into work.

A small number of refugees who have been in the UK for a number of years identified clear improvements in the level of support and the availability and accessibility of information for new arrivals. K, a Somali woman who is now aged 43 and who has lived in both Liverpool and Manchester, and who has been in the UK for nearly seven years said:

“I remember when I came there was not any help, there was no information given, so I have lost a lot of time. I regret that. If the information I have today I had on the day I came, I would have done a lot of things. Unfortunately people who are not citizens did not get the information. There were not any services. There was just the Somali community centre, where people just came for help with filling forms and advice about immigration. After that, there was nothing. So now there is a big change. There is information, especially about education and training. The Somali community has more access to information.”

This opinion was by no means a universal one:

“There is still a gap in getting information to refugee communities. The services are still very few, with unqualified people who are giving the information. These people are helping each other, but are not reaching other people who need it. They are not getting the right information through to others who need it. Also there is still a problem of language, so people come to advice workers instead of going to their GP. Sometimes they ask advice workers to go to the GP or the social services, or housing or the job centre with them, but there are not enough workers to do that. So people are frustrated in not getting the information. And there are very few interpreters because of funding problems.”

In the statutory sector amongst young people, New Deal schemes were criticised for leading to a dead end – employers will take refugees on for the period of the scheme, and then sack them after six months. Beyond the disappointment of losing a job, this practice causes complications for refugees' entitlement to benefits. All NASS benefits are stopped when a person starts to work. Having to reapply after losing a job is a lengthy process, and for a period a claimant may be without any income, raising a question about whether starting a New Deal programme is worth the risk. Private employment agencies got some praise for being interested in individuals and for finding suitable jobs for them. They were reported as having a good choice of jobs so that jobseekers can start where they feel most comfortable, and they had a reputation for being successful in getting people into jobs. In particular, some agencies were seen as welcoming, as being willing to make relationships with individuals, and as having a 'nice social attitude'. This is in contrast to Job Centres, which were at the bottom of the pile in terms of their effectiveness, and were almost universally unpopular.

However, the main problems were identified as starting at a very early stage in the asylum-seeking process. One of the main ones was an absence of guidance from the immigration authorities. There has been no attempt to discuss an applicant's plans whilst in the UK, or to direct her/him to help from the start. Then after a decision is made to allow the asylum seeker to stay in the UK, no advice is offered: 'they said, you are free to move wherever you want to live, and left me completely on my own'.

We saw examples of good practice where in one case the LA link worker and in another the asylum support team had

worked hard to foster good relations with the local Job Centre. In the case of the link worker, he made a point of presenting himself personally at the Job Centre, got to know staff working there, and indeed had a surgery there twice a week. He also followed up other employment agencies in a systematic way. The asylum team also made efforts to make personal contact with the range of job seeking agencies in their area, and this paid off in terms of securing appropriate work for their clients. However in both these cases a great deal of energy was put into building these relationships, and the initiative was entirely on the part of the refugee support workers. The various refugee support projects that exist in the voluntary sector provide a forum where people can meet, can share information and can facilitate encounters among refugees and people in a position to lead them into jobs. However this is often a matter of chance than design. We heard of no schemes in the commercial sector with the potential to link workers with jobs.

Job Centres

There were significant difficulties reported with Job Centres amongst those interviewed, who found them unsympathetic, cumbersome and not able to take account of individual needs. And also that they are ineffectual, with staff that are untrained about and ignorant of the needs of refugees, who are often patronising or rude, and who seem themselves to be disengaged from the job. This view was conveyed with conviction, by almost all those interviewed. There were also complaints that advisors have prejudices about which jobs are suitable for 'asylum seekers' (used in a derogatory sense). Moreover, there was suspicion about Job Centres' tendency to urge asylum seekers to attend courses. Below are some examples of opinions expressed.

“Sometimes I wonder whether some people who work in the Job Centres are actually qualified to advise. I go there to seek a job and I'm only offered job training. An advisor I spoke to did not want me to try a job that was advertised, and he tells me he doesn't think that job is suitable for me, when actually that job is suitable for me. But when I look at the jobs he was saying were suitable for me, it was probably the worst jobs that were advertised. So I could sense that at the end of the day there are certain people who get access to information about certain jobs. Some of the jobs I was told were no longer there, but when you check on the job adverts, it's still there.”

“Job Centres steer you to jobs they think you ought to be doing, rather than those you have the skills and abilities for. In most cases they are manual jobs, jobs that are industrial based, physical jobs, when I'm trained for something different. Having been in a teaching job for 5 years, and a policeman for seven, I think these jobs and the experience should open many doors for me, rather than for someone to steer me towards some kind of weight-lifting job in the industrial sector, where you don't need qualifications and expertise.”

“They put on a hygiene course. I don't have a problem with that, but sometimes I think that moves people in directions and into occupations the (Job Centres) feel they (asylum seekers) could cope with, and that's the restaurant business. But what we need in the long term is how we can build on these people's skills. Why are their qualifications not recognised?”

“What is that course? Where does it lead you? If someone does a computer course and then no company is going to take them and they end up back in the restaurant, how effective is it? Are people forced into language courses because Job Seekers' Allowance says if you don't attend so many courses they'll stop your rent allowance? Sometimes I think courses put on just so they can tick a box to say it's been done.”

“Job Centres are useless, they force you into menial bottom-of-the-ladder jobs. If you go to them with qualifications they are not equipped to help you. Most people in the Job Centres have not been to university themselves.”

They keep on pressing you into cleaning type jobs, push you down even further in life. I find them very offensive and would rather not go to them. Mostly I have relied on myself for ideas and initiatives.”

“We are told we should go to this agency to get a job. When my friends have gone to the agency the problem is they don't give you a choice. Your experience is not taken into account. They send you anywhere they can. People in my community say it is easy to get a job if you are willing to do labouring. That is what the agencies offer you.”

There were numerous and graphic descriptions of the dread and humiliation people felt on entering the Job Centre, on being told to 'come back tomorrow' only to be informed that a suitable job had gone, that they are 'over-qualified for this job', or that their 'English isn't good enough'. Several people said they had been optimistic at the start that Job Centres would help them, but became disillusioned very quickly: 'I gave them my background, they kept my profile, then advised me to go to college to improve my English, and no jobs were offered. They told me there are no jobs in the area'. People complained about the bureaucracy involved, and the asking of irrelevant questions, or questions to which the answer is already apparent. One woman described how she had been interviewed for 15 minutes by an advisor, and then was asked 'Do you speak English?'

These comments throw some light on the findings of previous research, which suggested that refugees prefer to consult agencies targeted at their needs rather than relying on the Employment Service where staff are less likely to have an understanding of issues specific to refugees. Sargeant and Forna (2001) found that only a tiny proportion in their study found a job through the Employment Agency.

Making a difference

It was suggested that what would make a difference is if Job Centres employed more people from different backgrounds, especially asylum seekers and refugees. This would be reassuring for refugees walking into them and seeing people from their own community. People need an encouraging environment and extra time to understand a confusing new culture, rather than 'business, business, business'. If advisors can understand that, they know what the refugee is talking about: 'I want to talk to someone who knows where I'm coming from'.

It was felt that there is a need for training in awareness of the problems of asylum seekers, the reasons why they are here, and the barriers they face. Also workers in Job Centres need to have a positive attitude and be intelligent about the information they are giving, so that they are not pushing people into dead end courses or jobs that are manifestly unsuited to their skills.

When asked what would make a difference to their experiences of looking for work, several people said what they needed most was information, 'Information at the very start about whether you can work, what you have to do to be able to work in your own job, how long it will take and where you have to start. I was left without any of this information'. Someone else said:

“Educate local people about why people come here in exile. If they could learn why they come, and what kind of life they used to live back home, this might remove that xenophobic attitude within British society. This is the main problem. Some people have never gone out of Manchester and for us to expect them to understand other cultures – Africa and Asia for instance – is almost a dream. So exposure to refugees and asylum seekers and also education, which should include the Government – senior government officials. They should be educated first, because they speak in a language that inflames ordinary people.”

A question that arose several times, was

“Why doesn’t anybody make an effort to build upon our existing skills? Different schemes could be developed with big employers to take on some of the refugees and give them on the job training opportunities. There’s no holistic approach – it’s not joined up.”

and again,

“It would have been more useful to myself and the host community if I had been allowed to use the skills I had, rather than be forced to take up unskilled jobs, precious time lost.”

“They have to make consideration of the situation of the person. Asking someone who just came recently to the UK what experience work you have – requiring three years experience or something like that. Maybe you could ask that of someone who has been in UK for a long time, that’s another case. But someone who came only a few months ago – you shouldn’t ask them about it. So this always happens. It should be reduced or taken out of application forms. That would make it easier to get a job.”

Conclusion

As we have emphasised elsewhere, most refugees in the study depended on getting information about jobs from people in their own communities or agencies catering specifically for refugees, rather than formal employment advice agencies. There appears to us to be an overwhelming case for making available increased resources for such agencies, that appear to be trusted by refugees, and that are perceived as understanding and being equipped to meet their needs in terms of work.

However Job Centres were almost universally and vehemently criticised by respondents in the study, for being cumbersome and bureaucratic, and for having no interest in the needs of refugees. They should not be ‘let off the hook’ in this respect, in that they have a duty to offer a service to all people eligible for work. It is not enough that they direct people towards attending courses that lead to a dead end, or jobs that are unsuited to refugees’ skills. The prejudices observed by refugees need to be confronted, and appropriate training and supervision made available to them. Moreover, advisers with experience in understanding the needs of refugees should be on hand, at least in those Job Centres located in areas where refugees are located. The practice we encountered where local authority link workers took steps to make direct relationships with workers in Job Centres is an example that needs to be followed. This will require development of policy and extra resources, since the extra pressure placed on individual link workers is not sustainable.

Recommendations

24. New Deal provision needs to be reorganised so that it can provide an appropriate service for refugees in light of the strong criticism it received for being ineffective and insensitive to individual and cultural needs.
25. There is an urgent need to review Job Centres and the way that they provide assistance to refugees. Criticism included; poorly trained staff; an inflexibility of approach; accusations of racism; failure to recognise qualifications; and pushing people into inappropriate courses.
26. Specifically it is suggested that Job Centres and other agencies providing similar support into employment should:
 - Actively recruit from refugee communities. This will require professional training, prior to recruitment. An Intermediate Labour Market scheme seems a suitable mechanism for this.
 - Provide training for staff on employment issues relevant to refugees.
 - Ensure that all staff are fully aware of how qualifications can be recognised.
 - Have a greater range of more appropriate courses that refugees can be signposted to.
27. Specialised assistance for refugees into employment needs to be provided as soon as they gain permission to work and preferably in the period leading up to this, as part of the settlement process. This assistance should take the form of a skilled personal advisor who would help the refugee to develop an individual plan into employment and be able to provide advice on subjects including: transfer of qualifications and experience; the UK job market; high quality volunteering opportunities; and specialised refugee employment schemes.
28. The skills of refugees should be registered at the point they gain permission to work to provide information for employers, education providers and other agencies working with this group, and to enable the development of a Northwest strategy to take advantage of these skills, including developing targeted projects around specific skills. There should be continued monitoring of the jobs that refugees go into to measure the success of initiatives that assist refugees into employment, and the extent to which the Northwest is succeeding in taking advantage of those skills.
29. NASS should review the way that it provides support to asylum seekers who have permission to work, to avoid creating a benefits trap that deters them from gaining employment.

12 Conclusion

The study has confirmed and reinforced the findings of previous quantitative research, and we hope has put a human face on the statistics. The majority of refugees in the UK are unemployed or under-employed, many of them unnecessarily. This was the case here, and although we did find people who are satisfied with the work they have found, the majority are unhappy in work because they are not in jobs for which they were trained and have a vocation. There are still others who still wait – not passively, but actively pursuing all possibilities, only to find a dead end every time.

Refugees and asylum seekers in this study showed themselves to be willing, indeed enthusiastic to find work and to be independent. They were unhappy about living on state support and longed to be free from the restrictions and from the poverty this brings. They receive little by way of support to find routes into work. Official treatment of them, from an interview with an immigration officer to the granting of refugee status, is to leave them to their own devices in finding suitable employment. As described in the study, some of them have shown initiative and enterprise in this, and have sought out the means to help them provide for themselves and their families. Others meet obstacles along the way, some of them unnecessary and discouraging, all of them crushing and oppressive.

One of the refugees interviewed identified the problems succinctly and clearly. On being asked if overall she felt she had been treated fairly in her attempts to find work in the UK she said:

“Mmm, that is a difficult question. The people in general who I came across have been very helpful, giving me information and a lot of things. I have got really good colleagues, nice people from UK who are British and are white people. I am not saying they were black only, but white people also. They have been very helpful, sending me whatever they see – advertisements for jobs – sending them to my house. But as a system, we can say it is not fair, the system of the Government, how they make the rules saying you cannot work in your own profession. If they want they could train us for a shorter time, and they can test us. But it’s not a fair system that punishes us. They have got a resource in this country and they are not taking advantage of it. I can’t understand it. It’s very frustrating.”

Refugees and asylum seekers with permission to work deserve and require improved standards and more coherent services if they are to find work in the UK, a country that needs their skills, labour and desire to contribute. Unless a determined attempt is made to make changes, not only will a potentially rich pool of talent be wasted, the toll of illness, disaffection and alienation will increase.

13 Recommendations

The recommendations presented here are those that flowed most strongly from the research and should be seen as adding to and developing the findings of other research and reports in this field. They are not intended to be comprehensive.

“Refugee” is used in these recommendations to denote anybody at any stage of the immigration process that has permission to work, including asylum seekers, people who have been granted ELR or humanitarian protection, as well as those who have been granted refugee status.

Many of the recommendations below can be straightforwardly related to the NWDA strategy for the Northwest as described in Section 3 of this report, and should be used to aid the realisation of this strategy.

As is made clear in this research, refugees are a heterogeneous group who come from many countries, have many different experiences and cultural backgrounds. Many of the recommendations emphasise the need to target initiatives, provide services that are sensitive to individual needs and the necessity to work with refugee communities to design and provide effective services. Patently, what works with young people from Somalia living in Liverpool may not work with Zimbabweans living in Salford.

Where skills and qualifications are referred to in the recommendations it should be borne in mind that these refer to the full range of skills and qualifications from motor mechanics and plumbers, who are skilled but may not have any form of qualification, to highly qualified doctors, teachers and lawyers.

Relevant NWDA Strategic Aims and key activities

Strategic Aim 6 – Secure economic inclusion

Key activities

- 6.1 Encourage businesses start ups, particularly by women, and black and minority ethnic groups. (Lead partner Small Business Service.)
- 6.3 Encourage the public and private sector to employ people from disadvantaged communities and groups, through positive action programmes and other measures, and promote the benefits to employers of equality and diversity in the workforce. (Lead partner NWDA.)
- 6.5 Develop intermediate labour market initiatives. (Lead partner Job Centre Plus.)
- 6.6 Enable individuals to compete for job opportunities by equipping them with appropriate skills, developing employability initiatives, encouraging equality of opportunity for learning, and addressing barriers to work. (Lead partner Learning and Skills Councils.)

Strategic Aim 7 – Develop and maintain a healthy labour market

Key activities

- 7.1 Implement the Framework for Regional Employment and Skills Action (FRESA) with particular emphasis to be given to the following key priorities:
 - Increasing individual demand for and participation in learning
 - Ensuring practical and measurable commitments to workforce developments by employers and trade unions
 - Adult basic skills
 - ICT / e-learning

- High impact skills including customer service
- Management capability
- Attracting and retaining graduates

Many of the recommendations below relate to the NWDA Regional Economic Strategy (2003). Where recommendations relate strongly to a different key activity it is referenced. Some recommendations fall outside of the NWDA strategic plan. A responsible body is suggested for these. Where unreferenced the recommendation relates to strategic aim 6.6.

1. Training needs to be carried out for workers at agencies supporting refugees back into work. This training should include coverage of the psychological impact of: enforced joblessness due to a lack of permission to work; trauma suffered prior to arriving in the UK; bereavement due to loss of homeland; loss of status of people who were previously working often in highly skilled jobs; pressure of having to learn how to live in a new land; having to live on a very low income whilst awaiting decision on immigration status; extended period where there is uncertainty about whether they will be allowed to stay in the UK; racism and the continuing frustration of not being able to use the skills that they have.
2. The Government should consider separately, and as a priority, the “permission to work” element of an asylum application, pending consideration of the full application, as the extended time period between when people entering the UK and being allowed to work leads to loss of skills and psychological trauma, making eventual employment more difficult. (Home Office)
3. Failing granting of permission to work, the Government should take into account the longer term effects both on the individual and on community cohesion and should consider ways to assist asylum seekers to minimise the deleterious effects of enforced joblessness. (Home Office / Department of Work and Pensions)
4. The NWDA, together with its partners, should develop a strategy to enable the best use of qualified and skilled refugees to meet skill shortages in the Northwest. This should include not only assisting refugees to go into the same job as they previously held in their home country but also consideration as to how skills could be transferable to similar professions where there are skill shortages. (7.1)
5. All agencies supporting refugees into employment should be made aware of the role of UK NARIC and UK NRP in recognising qualifications, and of the existing routes into work for qualified refugees.
6. Provision should be made, in areas of skill shortage, to develop more straightforward routes for appropriately qualified and skilled refugees into work, building on, for instance, the work being done with refugee doctors. This provision could include: paying the fees for transitional courses and the process of recognition by professional and trade organisations; and developing the opportunities for placements and voluntary work in appropriate work settings; and providing a living wage for people whilst they are studying (it should be borne in mind that it is estimated to cost £6000 to retrain a refugee doctor and £220,000 to train a UK medical student). (7.1)
7. Professional organisations should be approached with a view to ensuring that the entrance requirements are at an appropriate and justifiable level and for their assistance in developing routes into employment in that profession. Specifically refugee doctors thought that the level of English required was set at a level higher than that required of UK students. (Professional bodies)

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8. There is a need for more creative solutions whereby refugees, who are unable to provide evidence of their qualification, often for the very reasons that led to them being a refugee, can demonstrate their skills and knowledge.
 9. There needs to be improvements in the way that English is taught including: better publicity of existing courses; greater opportunities for refugees to practice English outside the classroom; a concentration on speaking English rather than learning grammar; and English courses linked to the vocations that refugees wish to pursue. (7.1)
 10. Employers and other agencies supporting refugees into employment need to develop methods by which they can accurately assess the level of English required to do a job and the level of English that the refugee has.
 11. Employers should be encouraged to develop “on the job” training that includes learning the English necessary to carry out the job, building on existing examples of good practice. (7.1)
 12. Employers should be made aware of the benefits of employing refugees and in particular of the potential to solve skill shortages. (6.3)
 13. Employers need to counter the high levels of prejudice that refugees experience through: providing training for their workforce; reviewing their recruitment and selection procedures; and revising equal opportunities policies. (6.3)
 14. Employers need clear guidance on how to assess whether an applicant for a job has permission to work. Specifically it needs to be made clear that a National Insurance number is not required for someone to work legally. (6.3)
 15. Support should be given through refugee community organisations and other refugee service organisations to provide good quality employment advice, and information on rights and entitlements, as these organisations tend to have the best contact with refugee communities. These agencies could also act as a link between refugees and more mainstream agencies that assist people into employment. For this to be meaningful and effective resourcing and training of refugee community organisations will be required.
 16. Targeted support should be provided for refugee run businesses to develop good employment practices. (6.1)
 17. There are a number of bureaucratic barriers that need to be addressed both by Government and/or by employers including: how a relatively recently arrived refugee can be police checked; provision of references when there may be no way to contact previous employers; setting up a bank account when a refugee may not have all the required identity documents.
 18. Agencies assisting asylum seekers and refugees into employment should assist entry into good quality voluntary work as a means of getting useful experience, practice of English, training, and references. Very importantly it should, in the main, be seen as a short-term measure both by the employment agencies, the agency providing the voluntary work and the refugee themselves and support given so that the voluntary work is more likely to lead to paid work.
 19. Consideration should be given to the development of employment projects targeted at refugee communities where there are very high levels of unemployment among young people who have been in the UK for several years (some were born in the UK) and who have no substantial experience of paid employment.

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20. There needs to be further research done into illegal working that avoids further stigmatising asylum seekers, and includes examination of: the psychological impact on workers: why people choose or are forced through destitution into illegal working; links with unsafe business practices; impact on minimum wage; and impact on inclusion and integration.
 21. Specific initiatives should be developed by and for refugee women to enable them to work, which are: culturally sensitive; led by women; acceptable to the communities they are working with; and deal with childcare and health issues.
 22. Greater availability of appropriate and affordable childcare and the promotion to refugee communities of existing childcare provision is essential to allow refugee women who have lost their previous support systems to return to employment and education.
 23. Assistance should be provided to enable refugee women to develop their own childcare provision and to gain employment in mainstream childcare provision.
 24. New Deal provision needs to be reorganised so that it can provide an appropriate service for refugees in light of the strong criticism it received for being ineffective and insensitive to individual and cultural needs.
 25. There is an urgent need to review Job Centres and the way that they provide assistance to refugees. Criticism included; poorly trained staff; an inflexibility of approach; accusations of racism; failure to recognise qualifications; and pushing people into inappropriate courses.
 26. Specifically it is suggested that Job Centres and other agencies providing similar support into employment should:
 - Actively recruit from refugee communities. This will require professional training, prior to recruitment. An Intermediate Labour Market scheme seems a suitable mechanism for this. (Job Centre Plus 6.5.)
 - Provide training for staff on employment issues relevant to refugees.
 - Ensure that all staff are fully aware of how qualifications can be recognised.
 - Have a greater range of more appropriate courses to which refugees can be signposted. (LSCs 6.6.)
 27. Specialised assistance for refugees into employment needs to be provided as soon as they gain permission to work and preferably in the period leading up to this, as part of the settlement process. This assistance should take the form of a skilled personal advisor who would help the refugee to develop an individual plan into employment and be able to provide advice on subjects including: transfer of qualifications and experience; the UK job market; high quality volunteering opportunities; and specialised refugee employment schemes. (Job Centre Plus.)
 28. The skills of refugees should be registered at the point they gain permission to work to provide information for employers, education providers and other agencies working with this group, and to enable the development of a Northwest strategy to take advantage of these skills, including developing targeted projects around specific skills. There should be continued monitoring of the jobs that refugees go into to measure the success of initiatives that assist refugees into employment, and the extent to which the Northwest is succeeding in taking advantage of those skills. (6.3)
 29. NASS should review the way that it provides support to asylum seekers who have permission to work, to avoid creating a benefits trap that deters them from gaining employment. (NASS.)
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UK NRP UK National Reference Point for Vocational Qualifications -
<http://www.uknvp.org.uk>

APPENDIX 1: Table of Participants

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Country of origin	Status	Length of time in the UK	Work Status	Qualifications
1	F	48	Pakistan	ELR	4 years	Not in work	
2	M	53	Pakistan	ELR	4 years	Working	
3	M	40	Pakistan	ELR	3 years	Working	
4	M	44	Iraq (Kurdish)	Asylum seeker	2 years	Not in work	
5	M	38	Afghanistan	ELR	3 years	Not in work	
6	F	39	Iraq	ELR	3 years	Not in work	
7	M	27	Iraq	ELR	4 years	Not in work	
8	F	37	Somalia	ILR	6 years	Not in work	Secretarial; classroom assistant
9	M	19	Somalia	ILR	5 years	Not in work	
10	M	23	Somalia	ELR	2.5 years	Not in work	
11	M	25	Somalia	Refusal	2.5 years	Not in work	
12	M	25	Turkey (Kurdish)	ELR	2 years	Not in work	Incomplete medical training
13	M	44	DRC	ELR	1 year	Not in work	University professor
14	M	50	DRC	ELR	1 year	Not in work	Statistician
15	F	50	Cameroon	ELR	2 years	Not in work	Translator/proof reader
16	F	24	Kosovo	Asylum seeker	4 years	Care worker	
17	F	34	Iran	Asylum seeker	2 years	Factory worker	Teacher
18	M	36	Iran	Asylum seeker	2 years	Factory worker	
19	M	42	Zimbabwe	ELR	4 years	Not in work	
20	M	34	Iraq	ILR	4 years	Advice worker	Chemist
21	F	36	Afghanistan	ELR	3 years	Not in work	Doctor
22	F	43	Somalia	ILR	8 years	Advice worker	Doctor
23	F	37	Somalia	ILR	5 months	Not in work	Nurse/midwife
24	M	32	Iran	ILR	2 years	Not in work	Doctor
25	M	32	Iran	ILR	2 years	Not in work	Artist and journalist
26	M	40	Sudan	ILR	8 years	Not in work	Undergraduate and higher degrees (UK)
27	F	41	Kosovo	ELR	4 years	Not in work	
28	F	36	Kosovo	ELR	4 years	Not in work	University degree. Primary school teacher
29	M	42	Kosovo	ELR	4 years	Interpreter	University degree. Primary school teacher
30	F	31	Kosovo	ELR	4 years	Interpreter	University degree, Computer consultant
31	M	27	Kosovo	ELR	4 years	Not in work	Incomplete degree course
32	F	37	Kosovo	ELR	4 years	Working	
33	M	23	Iraq (Kurd)	Refusal	3 years	Factory worker	
34	M	29	Iraq (Kurd)	ELR	4 years	Security officer	
35	M	32	Iraq (Kurd)	ELR	4 years	Factory worker	
36	M	45	Sudan	ILR	10 years	Advice support worker	University degree (Sudan) MSc (UK)
37	M	24	Afghanistan	ELR	3 years	Working	Cert. iron turning
38	F	37	Afghanistan	ELR	3 years	Not in work	Teacher training
39	F	50	Pakistan	ELR	2 years	Machinist	Teacher training
40	M	40	Afghanistan	ELR	3 years	Machinist	Teacher training
41	F	24	Pakistan	Asylum seeker	3 years	Charity fund raiser	Incomplete law degree

APPENDIX 2: Interview schedule: individual interviews

Interviewer – explain that this research is seeking to find out about refugees' experiences of finding work since coming to the UK. No names will be made public and no one but the researchers and Refugee Action will be able to listen to the audio-tape. We will not use the tape recorder if anyone has any worries about it, but will make notes instead.

Age:

Gender:

Country of origin:

Date of arrival in UK:

Immigration status:

In paid work now?

Date of last paid job in UK:

Qualifications: (i) from country of origin
 (ii) from UK

Other training and dates:

Experiences of job seeking in UK

1. What kind of work did you do before you came to UK?
2. What kind of work were you looking for when you came here?
3. Was it work you have been trained for?
4. What places have you applied to for work (e.g. commercial, voluntary, local government sectors)?
5. Did anyone help you?
6. Describe your experiences – did you have to complete an application form? Did you get an interview? What happened at the interview? What were you told about the job? And about your suitability? What were you told about your qualifications or your training? Were you asked about the length of time you will be in the job/in the UK?

Applying for jobs

7. If you had to fill in an application form, did you get help with it?
8. Who helped you? Were there any problems with filling in the form?
9. Was there information about the job and the kind of person/qualifications that would be suitable?
10. Did you consider how your qualifications might be described to make them count in a different culture from the one you have come from? Did you discuss this with anyone? Who?

Experiences of support services

11. There are services in the UK that are meant to help people get a job. Have you had any contact with them? Which ones?
12. Have you heard about Job Centres? What do you think they are for? Have you looked for any help at any? Did anyone go with you? Did you find the Job Centre helpful? If yes, in what ways?
13. Do you know about Job Seekers' Allowance? Are you receiving it?
14. (If aged 18-24) Have you heard about New Deal? Have you taken any steps to be involved in it?
15. Are you in touch with any other support services? If yes, which ones? What kinds of advice have you looked for from them? Were they helpful?

Picking up new experiences

16. Did you think it might be helpful in getting a job if you got some work experience in the UK?
17. Have you tried to get experience? How did you go about it?
18. Did anyone advise you?
19. What kinds of experiences did you get (e.g. voluntary work; other work experience; informal paid work)?

Individual and community beliefs about employment

20. Have you talked to people where you live/in your own community about getting work? What did they tell you about their experiences, and what they think refugees have to do to get work?
21. Have they said there are special difficulties in getting a job? Did they say what the difficulties are? Do you agree with them? Have your experiences been similar, or different?

General

22. Thinking about your experiences of looking for a job in this country, do you think you have been treated fairly in your applications?
23. If working, do you think you are doing the kind of work you have been trained for?
24. What do you think might have made a difference in getting work/in getting suitable work?
25. Do you have any plans for job-seeking (or training) now?
26. How do you feel about your chances of getting work/of getting work suited to your qualifications/training?
27. What do you think about this?
28. Anything else you want to add?

Appendix 3: Focus group questions

1. What good experiences have you had of looking for a job?
2. What have been the problems for you in looking for a job?
3. What skills/knowledge do you need to make it easier?
4. What supports and information has made/would make a difference?

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