

# Labour Lost: Summary

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

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

January 2005

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# Summary Report



This study was carried out during 2003, funded by the Northwest Regional Development Agency, commissioned by Refugee Action and carried out in association with Lancaster University. It aims to explore the barriers to the employment of refugees in England's Northwest and to propose ways of overcoming them. The study not only sets out the problems faced by people arriving here in seeking employment, but also recognises the abilities and talents they bring. It highlights the potential richness of their contribution, seeks to confront the obstacles that are preventing that contribution and examines what might make the difference.

Refugee Action is an independent, national charity that has been working to help refugees build new lives in Britain for over 20 years. It is the largest refugee agency operating in the Northwest of England with offices in Liverpool and Manchester. It has an unrivalled network of contacts with refugee groups and has developed considerable expertise in community development, research and employment.

***Refugees are people with a well-founded fear of persecution who have been given the right to live and work in the UK. Asylum seekers have claimed refugee status, and their claim is currently being determined by the Home Office. Refugees can work legally. Asylum seekers (in the main) cannot.***

This study is qualitative, aiming to achieve depth and description to complement statistical work done elsewhere. There is a slowly growing body of statistical research about refugees and employment in the UK but there are few, if any, attempts to describe their experiences and to identify the successes and problems of looking for work as they themselves see them.

## *Background*

There is a shortage of some key skills within the UK labour market. The Government has announced plans to use the immigration system to target workers from abroad to fill the skills gap. Many asylum seekers have qualifications and skills that are needed by the economy and they are willing to work, but this resource remains untapped.

## *The existing research*

Previous research suggests that between 36 and 80 % of refugees are unemployed. Most studies agree that the lack of English language skills, psychological problems, confusion and reluctance amongst employers, racism and prejudice and lack of recognition of overseas qualifications are significant problems

## **The findings**

### *The psychological and physical impact*

Many asylum seekers arrive in the UK with both psychological and physical trauma, but consideration also needs to be given to the deterioration in health they experience. The process of seeking asylum can cause further deterioration. Long term unemployment on top of this can be a significant cause of ill health and make job seeking ever harder.

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### *Training and qualifications*

Those refugees who have professional skills in demand in the UK felt that they constantly came up against a series of barriers. All were keen to work, and to practice in the area for which they have been trained. The difficulties included recognition of qualifications, the difficulty of re-orienting to UK expectations and the level of proficiency in English demanded. Paradoxically professionally qualified people had more difficulty in acquiring suitable work than people without such qualifications, especially when they sought to practice in the same field as in their country of origin.

It is hard for qualified people to gain appropriate UK experience, often they felt directed towards unrelated work leading to them becoming increasingly alienated from their professional area and losing skills. Professional organisations are sometimes able to help, but their services can be expensive and time consuming.

### *The role of English*

Whilst lack of English language plays a big part in the problems refugees face when looking for a job, the issue is more complex than it at first appears. Many refugees coming here speak fluent though accented English, but have been told that this is not good enough to be offered a job, even jobs that do not include contact with the public. Instead they were referred to college to improve their language skills. Some refugees felt that the English classes available did not help them sufficiently with conversational or professional English.

### *Routes into work*

Many of the asylum seekers interviewed have qualifications and years of experience in their country of origin. They want to work, both for self-respect and to give something back to the UK. Prolonged unemployment leads to a loss of confidence and skills, and the longer it lasts, the greater the loss. Helping refugees into work swiftly and smoothly should be a priority both for the economy and for the emotional well-being of refugees themselves. Those who were working were proud of it, but very few were involved in the work for which they had been trained – a waste of skills which created a sense of loss to those we spoke to.

Interviewees who had come here as adults, had all worked in their country of origin. Many had found that non-UK experience was given little weight, in some cases acting as a cause for refusal even for jobs advertised as requiring no experience. Many refugees found it hard to produce references that were accepted in the UK. Some respondents felt that employers felt that employing refugees was 'risky' and so preferred not to.

The most important route into work was said to be word of mouth and contacts within their own refugee groups. This tended to lead to unskilled work but was seen as a valued opportunity to get a foot on the ladder.

Volunteering was seen as having many advantages for refugees. For example as a source of references when they apply for paid work, a way to practice and improve their English and a way to escape the isolation that many refugees experience. There are disadvantages too. Volunteering is no substitute for an income, and does not enable refugees to support themselves.

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There were concerns about the exploitation of workers, who do not know about employment rights and the minimum wage. Asylum seekers are particularly vulnerable but those we spoke to were aware of refugees who, desperate for work, had been forced into vulnerable situations.

#### *Gender and age related issues*

People interviewed in their forties and fifties said they had experienced discrimination because of their age. Some had even changed their age, thinking it would make them more employable. Others did not know their exact age as they had no birth certificates. Older people with qualifications were less likely to change career, often feeling too old to start again.

Young men also reported problems. Some were convinced that employers want young (white) English men to fill vacancies and that they were being discriminated against because of stereotypes of black men as a cause of trouble.

Women reported childcare to be a big problem, especially when there is no extended family here. They also spoke of specific health problems and issues related to caring for disabled or sick relatives.

#### *Employment services*

The refugees interviewed have had varying experiences of support, but the conclusion is that they depend primarily on people within their own communities who have been in the UK for a longer time, to give them information and help them to get jobs. This was a much more important route than any of the formal systems set up by the Government for helping people into work. There was a very low awareness of the existence of information, advice and guidance services.

Experiences of Jobcentre Plus were often poor. People reported a lack of awareness from some staff, being asked irrelevant questions and being pushed towards inappropriate low-level courses. Some private employment agencies were seen as more likely to offer a personal and welcoming service.

#### *Conclusions*

- Refugees are skilled people who want to work yet refugee unemployment is far too high. Those who are working are often working in jobs well below the level that their skill and experience would indicate. This damages their well-being and means the region is missing out on a pool of talent.
- Employment services are neither well known nor well liked within refugee communities. Refugee communities themselves are the most significant route into work, but this is often low paid.
- It is hard to get recognition for overseas qualifications or experience.
- It is hard to get appropriate conversational and vocational English language support.
- Refugees and asylum seekers are vulnerable to exploitation within the labour market.
- Several of the participants were forthright about their experiences of racism. Some employers and some agencies were accused of hostility to refugees.

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### *Recommendations*

A full list of recommendations is included with the research. The key recommendations are:

- The Government should urgently reconsider the option of allowing asylum seekers permission to work.
- There is an urgent need to review Job Centre Plus and the way that it provides assistance to refugees. Specifically they should actively recruit from refugee communities and provide more effective refugee awareness training to staff
- The NWDA should develop a strategy to enable the best use of qualified and skilled refugees to meet skills shortages in the Northwest.
- All agencies supporting refugees into employment should be made aware of the role of UK NARIC and UK NRP in recognising qualifications.
- Provision should be made to develop more straightforward routes for appropriately qualified and skilled refugees into work. This provision could include paying the fees for transitional courses, improving the process of recognition by professional and trade organisations and providing a living wage for people whilst they are studying.
- Employers need clear guidance on how to assess whether an applicant for a job has permission to work.
- Targeted support should be provided for refugee-run businesses to set up and develop good employment practices.
- 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.
- Employers should be encouraged to develop “on the job” training that includes learning the English necessary to carry out the job.
- Agencies assisting asylum seekers and refugees into employment should assist entry into good quality voluntary work as a means of getting useful experience.
- Support should be given to refugee community organisations and other refugee service organisations enabling them to provide good quality employment advice and information, as these organisations tend to have the best contact with refugee communities.
- Further research needs to be carried out into illegal working that avoids further stigmatising asylum seekers.
- Specific initiatives should be developed by and for refugee women to enable them to work, for example addressing childcare and health issues.

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