



The Refugee Council's evidence to the Work and Pensions Select Committee on the Department for Work and Pension's services to ethnic minorities

December 2003

Introduction

The Government's Strategy for Refugee Integration *Full and Equal Citizens (2000)*ⁱ argues that "employment is arguably the key factor to integration of refugees". Access to the UK labour market, however, is a big challenge faced by almost every refugee seeking a job.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) does not have any official statistics of refugee unemployment. However, evidence suggests it is by far above the national average for any disadvantaged group in the UK. A recent DWP study reveals only "29% of respondents were working at the time of the study compared with 60% ethnic minority population". The report puts unemployment among refugees at 36%. However, previous research reports suggest refugee unemployment rates between 60-90%ⁱⁱ. Unemployment among refugee women is even higher compared to refugee menⁱⁱⁱ. According to the DWP report "they [refugees] are the most disadvantaged group" in the UK labour market.

The Refugee Council's work on employment

The Refugee Council is the largest charity working with refugees in the UK. We have been involved in employment policy development and delivery for many years. The following paragraphs illustrate our efforts, and our commitment to work with government departments, the rest of the voluntary sector and others, to support the employment needs of refugees.

The Refugee Council Training and Employment Section (TES) provides learning, development and employment opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers. TES has 20 years' experience of working with asylum seekers and refugees to help them overcome the barriers they face in accessing education and employment, thereby assisting their successful integration into society. Our training centre, based in Clapham, London, provides a uniquely supportive environment in which students gain the confidence, skills and recognised qualifications they need to achieve their goals. The Refugee Council is currently leading the ASSET UK EQUAL Development Partnership (DP) which is working UK-wide to support the vocational and social integration of asylum seekers and is involved, as a partner, in the LEADER EQUAL Development Partnership (DP)^{iv} which is supporting refugees into employment in London.

The Refugee Council and the British Medical Association have set up a voluntary Refugee Doctors Database and is working in partnership with the Department of Health and other service providers involved in the BMA-led Refugee Doctor Liaison Group to support the needs of refugee doctors in the UK. It is also supporting the needs of other refugee health professionals through the Refugee Dentists Steering Group and Refugee Nurses Task Force.

The Refugee Council is currently contributing to refugee integration strategies in London, East England and, recently, to the Yorkshire and Humberside strategy. We are also working through National Connexions Service Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Forum to ensure the needs of refugee and asylum seeking young people are met. We are also supporting the efforts of Refugee Teachers Steering Group to

support the needs of refugee teachers in the UK. We provide awareness-raising training for employers about the economic potential, recruitment and support of refugees seeking jobs.

The Refugee Council has developed a refugee learning, skills and employment strategy, which we are implementing through our constituted Education, Training and Employment Working Group (ETEWG). We are also working with the DWP and the Employment, Training and Adult Education Sub-group of the Home Office's National Refugee Integration Forum (NRIF) to develop a long-term strategy to support refugees into employment. We have recently contributed to the London Development Agency's research about maximising the economic potential of refugees in London and are currently assessing the impact of the Home Office decision to withdraw permission to work on asylum seekers.

Refugees' contributions to the UK

Throughout history, refugees have been contributing to the UK economy and cultural diversity. The Home Office's survey *The Settlement of Refugees in Britain (1995)* "discovered the majority were highly qualified people, successful in their home countries, often coming from professional backgrounds" and that "the skills level of these refugees in fact exceeds that of the general British population". The Refugee Council's report *Credit to the Nation* (1997 and re-edited in 2002) shows clearly the enormous contribution of refugees to the British society and economy over the last 450 years or so. Such prominent refugees as Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Yehudi Menuhin, Sir Georg Solti and Oliver Tambo, have made significant contributions. We believe ordinary refugees equally contributed to this country and society and many more would, if they could. Research evidence^v and that from existing refugee health professionals skills databases suggests that refugees have a huge untapped economic potential:

- (a) 56% of those aged 18 or over had a qualification;
- (b) 23-33% had a degree or post-graduate qualification;
- (c) 42-66% were working prior to arrival in the UK;
- (d) 65% of asylum seekers speak at least two languages in addition to their first language^{vi} and 60% of asylum seekers are under 30^{vii};
- (e) The Refugee Council/BMA Refugee Doctors Database Project has registered more than 920 unemployed refugee doctors in the UK;
- (f) The Royal College of Nursing maintains a database of Refugee Nurses containing data about over 150 refugee nurses, the vast majority of them are unemployed, in the UK; and
- (g) The Refugee Council/British Dental Association Refugee Dentists Voluntary Database has over 100 unemployed refugee dentists currently living in the UK.

This body of evidence suggests that asylum seekers and refugees have a huge untapped economic potential.

Barriers to employment of asylum seekers and refugees

Refugees seeking jobs face multiple barriers to employment. These barriers are well documented by recent research reports which suggest that the following, in no particular order of importance, are the barriers which impede access to training and employment of refugees and asylum seekers:

1. Due to *lack of knowledge of entitlements*^{viii}, many service providers and individuals are confused. As a result, many potential service users fail to, or are denied, access to services that could support them to develop their skills and improve their employability. Many asylum seekers and refugees do not know about training and employment support opportunities and for this reason fail to take advantage of them. Consequently, they miss opportunities that could make a difference to their lives.
2. Lack of adequate English language skills is identified as a major barrier to employment^x. Many asylum seekers and refugees cannot enrol for education and training programmes because the medium of instruction is English. As a result, they cannot improve their knowledge and skills. Likewise, they cannot access employment in the UK because almost every employer expects their potential employees to have, among other essential requirements, at least good verbal and written communication skills.

Lack of access to childcare support for refugee single parents with children under five restricts access to education, training and employment support services. Although the Learning and Skills Council funds childcare places in FE colleges, the number of those they can support is limited. Besides, asylum seeker single parents are not entitled. *Cost of travel* tends to discourage many asylum seekers, in particular, and refugees, in general, from following learning programmes, especially, in FE colleges. So, despite the fact that they are entitled to free ESOL courses, the vast majority of those who live on vouchers cannot afford the bus fare and miss opportunities to improve their language skills.

3. *Lack of recognition of overseas qualifications* is a major obstacle for the vast majority of asylum seekers and refugees who arrive in the UK with qualifications from their home countries^x. Recent research suggests employers experience difficulty in assessing the UK equivalence of foreign qualifications. Some tend to think they are not as good as the UK qualifications.
4. *Funding requirements* are also a barrier. Due to their unrealistic eligibility criteria, they tend to restrict access to training and development programmes. Currently, the vast majority of asylum seekers are not eligible for DWP services. For example, asylum seekers who applied to the Home Office for asylum after April 2000 are not allowed to join New Deal 25+ programmes, even if they have been granted permission to work. Training and development programmes funded by the European Social Fund, among other requirements, are not accessible to anybody who does not have permission to work and who has not been unemployed for at least six months.
5. Confusion over *permission to work documentation* is another major barrier. In spite of the availability of an electronic code of practice for employers (on the Home Office's website) and quality advice from voluntary sector organisations on this

matter, UK employers are not yet well informed and need help to make sense of the plethora of permission to work documents produced by the Home Office. As employers are liable to legal prosecution for employing individuals who do not possess the permission to work from the Home Office as stipulated in the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996, UK employers are prompted by the prospect to avoid asylum seekers.

6. *Attitudes of employers*, which tend to be affected, in part, by negative press coverage of asylum issues are also a major barrier. Participants in a recent *Personnel Today*^{xi} and Refugee Council survey claimed they could not get jobs due to racism and racial prejudice. Employers who took part in the same study revealed they were afraid of breaking immigration and asylum law; they experienced difficulty assessing overseas qualifications and valuing overseas work experience because it is difficult to equate to work experience in the UK.
7. UK immigration and asylum legislation is hindering participation of asylum seekers and refugees in the labour market^{xii}. Section 8 of Immigration and Asylum Act 1996, Immigration and Asylum Act (1999) and sections 147 and 153 of Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act (2002) continues to restrict access to employment.
8. Unfamiliarity with the UK jobsearch culture is also a major barrier. Many asylum seekers and refugees come from cultural backgrounds where 'selling yourself' is regarded as inappropriate. As a result, many of them tend to under sell themselves at interviews and many others do not know how to conduct an effective jobsearch.
9. Lack of UK work experience continues to impede access to the labour market for the vast majority of asylum seekers with permission to work and refugees. This is mainly due to the value unnecessarily attached to it by almost all the UK employers. As there are very few opportunities for volunteering, work placement, mentoring and, in the case of refugee doctors, clinical attachments, they tend to be excluded from the labour market because they do not have any UK work experience.
10. Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks are restricting refugee jobseekers accessing jobs with children and other vulnerable people. This is mainly because their records cannot be obtained easily from overseas.
11. Lack of UK references is another hindrance that asylum seekers and refugees must overcome to gain employment. As they cannot produce UK references, proving they have the experience and skills they claim to have is difficult.
12. Lack of support to overcome barriers to self-employment and entrepreneurship^{xiii}.

Recommendations

In the light of these barriers, it is evident that asylum seekers and refugees need support to be able to make the transition to employment and avoid the risk of social exclusion. The Refugee Council would like to make the following recommendations, which we believe are necessary measures if DWP is to make a difference to refugees' lives:

- 5.1. Jobcentre Plus should ensure the proposed *Jobcentre Plus Operational Strategy* improves the standards and delivery of *Jobcentre Plus* services to refugees by doing the following:
- (a) Raise awareness of staff about the needs of refugees and asylum seekers and how such needs could be supported to ensure they effectively improve refugees' participation in training and employment.
 - (b) Establish systems to ensure refugee clients receive accurate, up-to-date and sufficient information about Jobcentre Plus services to improve refugees take up of the services especially training programmes.
 - (c) Ensure Personal Development Plans are developed for asylum seekers and refugees who wish to improve their employability to access the labour market to ensure support to individual refugee jobseekers is targeted and their progress is measured.
 - (d) Support and encourage employers to develop positive attitudes towards and recruit refugees and asylum seekers with permission to work.
 - (e) Audit refugee-specific projects, services and job creation schemes to ensure availability of such services for unemployed refugees.
 - (f) Assure the quality of services for unemployed refugees to ensure they are referred to high quality services to make the transition to work.
 - (g) Fund a publicity campaign about the contribution of refugees to the UK economic and cultural life to combat any impact of negative press coverage^{xiv} on refugee jobseekers.
 - (h) Engage employers in programmes for unemployed refugees to ensure high success rate.
 - (i) Engage the voluntary sector in the delivery of programmes for unemployed refugees.
 - (j) Give refugees the necessary support to acquire the business skills and/or business start up capital to enable them to start and sustain their own businesses.
 - (k) Establish a system to ensure data about refugee unemployment or participation in the UK labour market is collected, collated, disseminated and effectively used to inform policy development or to improve policy delivery.

- (l) Fund recognition of overseas qualifications^{xv}, accreditation of prior learning and requalification programmes for refugee professional groups.
 - (m) Survey and bridge gaps in provision of customised re-qualification programmes for refugee professional groups.
- 5.2. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to set up a national refugee employment task group to develop, implement, monitor and review a strategy to support employment of asylum seekers with permission to work and refugees in the UK.
- 5.3. The Home Office is strongly advised to do the following:
- (a) Permit all asylum seekers to work during the reception phase.
 - (b) Provide funding for projects to encourage volunteering for asylum seekers.
- 5.4. DWP to work with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to improve access to and the quality of English language courses for refugees and asylum seekers.
6. DWP to work in partnership with Connexions partnerships to support the needs of 13-19 year-old asylum seekers and refugees who wish to access employment opportunities in England.
7. DWP to work closely with the Regional development agencies (RDAs) to ensure Framework for Regional Employment and Skills Action (FRESA) in each region supports the skills and employment needs of refugees.
8. DWP to work in partnership with regional asylum seeker and refugee integration consortia- which the Home Office is funding to develop strategies for refugee integration- to support the learning and employment needs of refugees in all regions and address any adverse effects that the dispersal policy may have on asylum seekers and refugees.
9. DWP to work in partnership with information, advice and guidance (IAG) service providers to ensure their service respond to and meet the specific needs of refugees and asylum seekers.

Conclusion

The Refugee Council is pleased to be able to provide evidence to the House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee on the important services of DWP to refugees. We believe the barriers to employment are well documented and known to DWP. What is needed is action to tackle the issue of refugee unemployment and combat social exclusion of refugees. We believe refugees' untapped economic potential needs to be fully utilised. This has clear benefits for refugees, UK businesses and the people of this country. The Refugee Council is willing to continue working with DWP, other government departments and others key stakeholders to achieve this important goal.

*Refugee Council
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ⁱ This is the Home Office's refugee integration strategy.

ⁱⁱ Mayor of London (2002) *Missed Opportunities* published by Greater London Authority; The Refugee Council (1999) *Creating the Conditions for Refugees to Find Work*, published by the Refugee Council; D Shiferaw and H Hagos (2002) *Refugees and Progression Routes to Employment*, published by The Refugee Council, London.

ⁱⁱⁱ Peabody Trust (1999) *Refugee Skills-Net: The Employment and Training of Skilled and Qualified Refugees*, London.

^{iv} Education Action International's Refugee Education and Training Advisory Service, London, leads LEADER EQUAL Development Partnership.

^v Alice Bloch (2002) *Refugees' Opportunities and Barriers in Employment and Training*, published for DWP, by Her Majesty's Stationary Office's Corporate Documents Services, Leeds

^{vi} Refer to the report of The Guardian (2001) *Welcome to the UK: A Special Investigation into Asylum and Immigration*, The Guardian, London.

^{vii} The Home Office statistical report.

^{viii} The Refugee Council (1999) *Creating the Conditions for Refugees to Find Work*, published by the Refugee Council.

^{ix} Alice Bloch (2002) *Refugees' Opportunities and Barriers in Employment and Training*, published for DWP, by Her Majesty's Stationary Office's Corporate Documents Services, Leeds

^x Fabien Bunani (2002) *Refugee Engineers Workshop*, a report published by RAISE, London; The Employability Forum report (2003) *Conference Report: Refugee Nurses into Employment*, London; RETAS (2002) *Qualifications of Refugees and Employment in Europe*, RETAS, London and The Refugee Dentists Steering Group report (2002) *Unlocking Potential*, London

^{xi} *Personnel Today's* website (November, 2001).

^{xii} Alice Bloch (2002) *Refugees' Opportunities and Barriers in Employment and Training*, published for DWP, by Her Majesty's Stationary Office's Corporate Documents Services, Leeds

^{xiii} Please refer to *Access to Financial Services* (1999) the report of Policy Action Team (PAT) 14 and *Enterprise and Social Exclusion (1999)*, the report of Policy Action Team 3 of the National Strategy for Neighborhood Renewal, published by HM Treasury

^{xiv} Ceri Mollard (2001), *Asylum: The Truth Behind the Headlines: Asylum Seekers Press Report*, Oxfam, Scotland

^{xv} Refer to RETAS (2002) *Qualifications of Refugees and Employment in Europe*, RETAS, London, The Refugee Council (1999) *Creating the Conditions for Refugees to Find Work*, published by the Refugee Council and Peabody Trust (1999) *Refugee Skills-Net: The Employment and Training of Skilled and Qualified Refugees*, London.