



# The forbidden workforce:

Asylum seekers, the employment  
concession and access to the UK labour  
market

Refugee Council

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**Deng Yai**  
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## **CONTENTS**

Foreword	4
Executive Summary	5
1. Background	9
2. Methods	10
3. Characteristics of the Sample	11
4. Findings and Discussion	14
4.1. Asylum Decision-making Process	14
4.2. Asylum Support System	16
4.3. Access to the UK Labour Market	18
4.4. Access to Further Education	21
4.5. Access to Vocational Training	22
4.6. Access to Volunteering	23
5. Conclusions	25
6. Recommendations	28
7. References	30

## FOREWORD

The Home Office's *Full and Equal Citizens – A Strategy for the Integration of Refugees into the United Kingdom* and its updated version *Integration Matters* are a welcome contribution towards a more joined-up and holistic approach to addressing the challenge of integrating refugees into our society. The Refugee Council and refugee community organisations (RCOs) support the broad aims of this strategy.

However, we believe the reception phase ought to be seen as an integral part of the integration process and practical measures and interventions should be put in place to ensure it is. Integration of refugees is a dynamic, two-way, long-term and multi-dimensional process that starts from the time asylum seekers arrive in the host country. Integration can take years. Therefore, the earlier asylum seekers embark on this long and arduous process, the better their chances of avoiding the risk of social exclusion.

ASSET UK Development Partnership believes that it is vital that integration strategies support the needs of asylum seekers as well as refugees. We believe such strategies could serve a dual purpose: to help integrate asylum seekers into the UK labour market and society and to help reintegrate failed asylum seekers into the labour markets in their home countries.

Asylum seekers are an economic asset. The experience, qualifications and skills they bring to the UK, which our survey highlights, could help address skills deficiencies and boost the UK economy. However, we recognise refugees faced huge barriers to employment even before the Home Office's policy change on the employment concession or permission to work. Refugees have always needed resources and opportunities to rebuild their lives, to support businesses in their local areas and to contribute to the economic competitiveness of this country.

*The Forbidden Workforce* suggests that the decision of the Home Office to withdraw the work concession with effect from 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2002 has severely affected asylum seekers, and points the right way ahead: government policy should aim to encourage asylum seekers to work. Such a policy will ensure asylum seekers access the labour market and support themselves, our businesses and our economy. I urge the Government to give serious consideration to the report's recommendations.



Anna Reisenberger

**Chair, ASSET UK Development Partnership Board  
Development Director, Refugee Council**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The employment concession was introduced in 1986. Asylum seekers were allowed to apply for permission to work if, after six months, they had not received an initial decision on their claim. Only principal asylum applicants were permitted to work; dependants of main applicants who were 16 and over were denied permission to work. On 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2002, the Home Office announced its decision to withdraw the employment concession (also known as the 'permission to work' or 'work concession') with immediate effect. The former Home Office Minister, Beverley Hughes MP, explained the reasons for withdrawal of the employment concession in a press release which her department issued on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2002. The Home Office argued that they were making 80 per cent of initial decisions within six months and speeding up the decision-making process. In addition, the Home Office believes employment is a pull factor that attracts people with unfounded claims to the UK and is committed to tackling such 'pull factors', including employment. ASSET UK Development Partnership conducted a survey to assess the impact of this decision on asylum seekers. The following is a summary of the findings.

### **METHODS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE**

Recent literature was reviewed to help answer the research questions. In addition, a survey questionnaire was circulated by e-mail to asylum seekers in England and Scotland through the Refugee Council's contacts and those of other organisations. The questionnaire was also posted on the website of the Refugee Council. Asylum seekers were asked to complete and return the questionnaire to the Refugee Council by 30<sup>th</sup> January 2004; approximately 18 months after the withdrawal of the employment concession.

186 completed questionnaires were analysed. 31 per cent of the respondents were women and 68 per cent were men, with 1 per cent declining to answer the question about gender. The majority of the respondents (52 per cent) were 25-35 year-old asylum seekers. 36-45 and 16-24 were the second and third largest age groups with 24 per cent and 17 per cent respectively. An overwhelming majority (90 per cent) of the sample was educated and qualified (GCSE equivalent to PhD). 57 per cent of the sample had a degree and/or a postgraduate qualification. The vast majority (86 per cent) of the sample had overseas work experience.

## KEY FINDINGS

1. More than three-quarters of the 186 respondents had waited for more than 6 months for a decision on their asylum claim and more than one-third had waited for more than 24 months.
2. The vast majority (more than three-quarters) of the respondents did not have permission to work.
3. Almost all the respondents wanted to work.
4. Asylum seekers overwhelmingly supported the right to work for principal applicants and their dependants. Nine out of ten of the sample said the Home Office should allow asylum seekers to work and eight out of ten of the sample said dependants of asylum seekers who are 16 years old or over should be allowed to work.
5. The majority of the sample wished to see asylum seekers allowed to work sooner, rather than later. More than three-quarters said asylum seekers should be allowed to work in the period between the first day of their asylum application and 6 months from the date of their application.
6. Nine out of ten of these asylum seekers were educated and qualified and over half of them had a degree and/or a postgraduate qualification.
7. Almost nine out of ten of the asylum seekers had worked in their country of origin or another country before they arrived in the UK.
8. The survey suggested that having no right to work not only affected asylum seekers' ability to secure paid employment but it also undermined their ability to support themselves and encouraged their reliance on the state for accommodation and financial support. Almost nine out of ten of the sample had never worked since arrival in the UK.
9. Although they managed to maintain their motivation, more than three-quarters of the sample said lack of permission to work affected their motivation to work, volunteer, study or do vocational training.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Home Office should allow asylum seekers and their dependants who are 16 years old or over to work to ensure they access the UK labour market, support themselves, their families and local businesses and contribute to the UK economic growth. ASSET UK Development Partnership strongly advises that the permission to work should be given to asylum seekers, preferably from the first day of their application for asylum and no later than six months from the date of the claim, rather than after 12 months. Such a policy will not only ensure asylum seekers achieve their full potential and pay something back to the UK but would also change negative perceptions about and project a positive image of asylum seekers, which in turn could impact on community cohesion.
2. The Home Office and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) should reinstate the eligibility of asylum seekers to participate in government-funded work-related training programmes, such as New Deal and Work-based Learning for Adults, and allow asylum seekers (especially 16-24 year-old asylum seekers, those without qualifications and women) to access vocational training.
3. The Home Office should put more effort into enabling asylum seekers to engage in voluntary work. This will enable asylum seekers to invest in their local communities, support local businesses and acquire knowledge, experience and skills that will help their integration once they become refugees or reintegration once they return to their countries of origin. One of ASSET UK DP partners, NIACE, is running a very successful skills audit pilot project in the East Midlands which has helped many asylum seekers to access voluntary work and gain useful UK work experience. Such projects are needed to promote volunteering for asylum seekers and funding should be identified to ensure they are widely available.
4. The Home Office, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the national Learning and Skills Council and the Scottish Executive should put specific measures in place to widen participation of asylum seekers (especially 16-24 year-old asylum seekers, those without qualifications and women) in further education (FE) and enable them to learn English, acquire other useful skills and improve their employability. Pilot projects run by partners of ASSET UK Development Partnership such as the Basic Skills Agency, the Refugee Council's Training and Employment Section (TES) and Sheffield College's ESOL programmes in Sheffield, Peterborough, Cardiff and Birmingham help asylum seekers learn general English as well as English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Many asylum seekers will benefit from, and funding should be targeted at, such projects providing English language learning opportunities that meet their diverse needs.
5. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the national Learning and Skills Council (LSC) should:

- (a) Increase ESOL provision for asylum seekers, especially community-based ESOL provision;
  - (b) Considerably reduce the current long waiting lists in colleges;
  - (c) Ensure the ESOL provision meets the needs of asylum seekers and employers and the national quality standards;
  - (d) Ensure other FE learning programmes take into consideration the ESOL needs of asylum seekers on mainstream courses and provide additional support for them to help them up-skill;
  - (e) Ensure citizenship courses are made available to asylum seekers integrating, where possible, such courses with English language and tailoring them to their needs to prepare them for life in the UK and/or to be able to meet the UK citizenship requirements when they become eligible for UK citizenship; and
  - (f) Improve accessibility of ESOL learning programmes.
6. The Home Office should review its integration policy and strategy to ensure they aim to encourage asylum seekers to improve their employability and to work while they are waiting for a decision on their asylum applications. It makes economic sense for refugee integration strategies to support the needs of asylum seekers as well as refugees. Such strategies could serve a dual purpose for asylum seekers by:
- (a) Helping to integrate asylum seekers into the UK labour market and society and ensuring they support themselves, support local businesses and contribute to the UK economy; and
  - (b) Helping reintegrate unsuccessful asylum seekers into the labour markets in their home countries once they are returned.
7. The Home Office should commission further research into cost-benefit analyses of the withdrawal of the concession to work and its impact on asylum seekers. This will help the Government develop an evidence-based policy.

## 1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1. The Home Office always made it clear that permission to work for asylum seekers might be granted as a concession outside the Immigration Rules, but that there was no absolute right to permission to work. However, under the concession, permission to work was normally granted if no decision on the asylum application had been taken within six months of it being lodged. Dependants of asylum applicants or asylum appellants were not granted permission to work under the employment concession unless there were exceptional circumstances. Permission to work was normally indicated by an endorsement to that effect on the reverse side of the Home Office 'Standard Acknowledgement Letter' (SAL1 or SAL2) and IS96. 'Port of entry' asylum seekers had to seek permission to work from the Immigration Service at any Immigration Service Office - not necessarily at the original port of entry. Where the request was not 'straightforward', the local port of entry might advise that authority should be obtained from the port of arrival where the applicant's records were held. 'In-country' applicants had to send SAL documents or preferably go in person to the Home Office at Lunar House, Croydon, rather than to a port of entry.
- 1.2. On 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2002, the Home Office changed that policy with immediate effect. The Home Office Minister, Beverly Hughes MP, explained the rationale and the reasons for this sudden change in a press release which was issued on the same day. According to the press release, the Home Office intended to:
- Encourage asylum seekers to use their time constructively;
  - Encourage asylum seekers to play an active role in the welfare of their own communities through volunteering;
  - Separate asylum policy from labour migration policy;
  - Maintain the dichotomy between the socio-economic entitlements of refugees and those granted to asylum seekers; and
  - Put in place a credible, 'end-to-end' asylum system.
- 1.3. The decision to withdraw the employment concession was made without any prior consultation (Hansard, 31 Oct 2002, Column 932W). The change was completely unexpected given the assurances made by Angela Eagle, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, to the Parliament on 19 Nov 2001 (Hansard, 19 Nov 2001, Column 5). The Home Office indicated that it was committed to its new policy (Hansard, 23 July 2002, Column 1044W) and unwilling to undertake a review of the decision (Hansard, 30 Oct 2002, Column 843W).

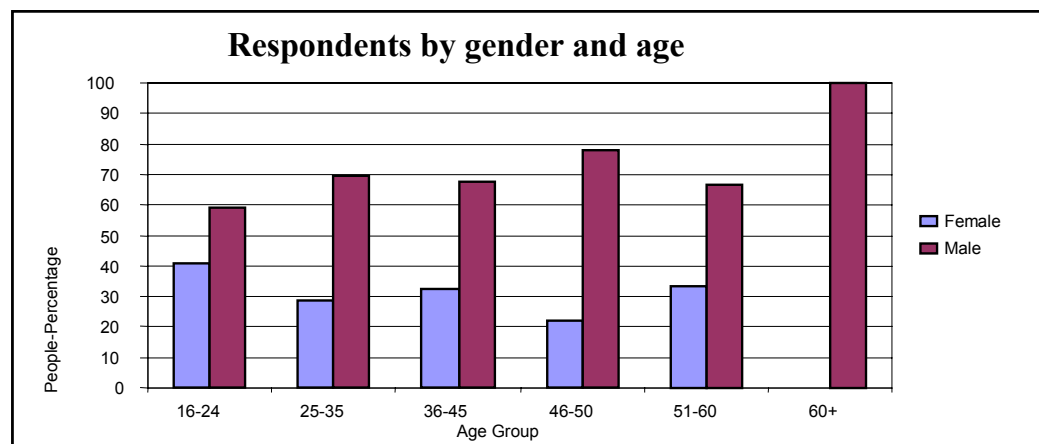
## 2. METHODS

- 2.1. The aim of the study was to assess the impact of the removal of the employment concession (or permission to work) on asylum seekers with a view to informing a public debate on the employment concession policy in the UK. The study pursued two main objectives. First, it aimed to find out how the withdrawal of the concession to work had affected asylum seekers in terms of (i) motivation to work, study, train or volunteer; and (ii) access to further education, vocational training, voluntary work and paid employment. Secondly, it sought to establish an indicative proportion of asylum seekers who had waited for decisions on their asylum claims for more than six months.
- 2.2. The study relied on two data sources. First, a review of recent literature was carried out to establish if the withdrawal of concession to work had affected asylum seekers' access to further education, vocational training, voluntary work and the UK labour market or their motivation to study, train, volunteer or seek paid employment. The literature review also provided valuable information about the asylum statistics. Second, a self-administered survey questionnaire was used to solicit the views of asylum seekers. The questionnaire was circulated through the Refugee Council's Education, Training and Employment Working Group (ETEWG) contact list, its website, its regional offices and other contacts.
- 2.3. The study sampled and analysed 186 self-completed questionnaires from a self-selected sample of asylum seekers in England and Scotland. 31 per cent of the respondents were women and 68 per cent were men, with 1 per cent declining to answer the question about gender. Different age groups in the asylum seeking population were represented in the sample: young (16-24 year-olds) and (25-35); middle aged (36-45); older (46-50) and (51-60) and people of pension age (60 and over). ASSET UK Development Partnership does not claim that the sample is representative of the asylum seeking population. 186 respondents represent a small sample. However, the sample is reflective of the principal asylum seeker population.

### 3. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

- 3.1. The respondents to the survey were largely male (68 per cent). However, there was a good response rate from female asylum seekers too (31 per cent). This is slightly lower than the percentage of females in the asylum seeking population in 1999 (33 per cent), but higher than the percentages in 2000 (19 per cent), 2001 (22 per cent) and 2002 (26 per cent). 1 per cent of the respondents did not specify their gender. The majority of asylum applicants in the period between 1999 and 2002 were male. In 1999 men made up 67 per cent of the population and this increased to 81 per cent in 2000. However, their percentage decreased slightly to 78 per cent in 2001 and 74 per cent in 2002.

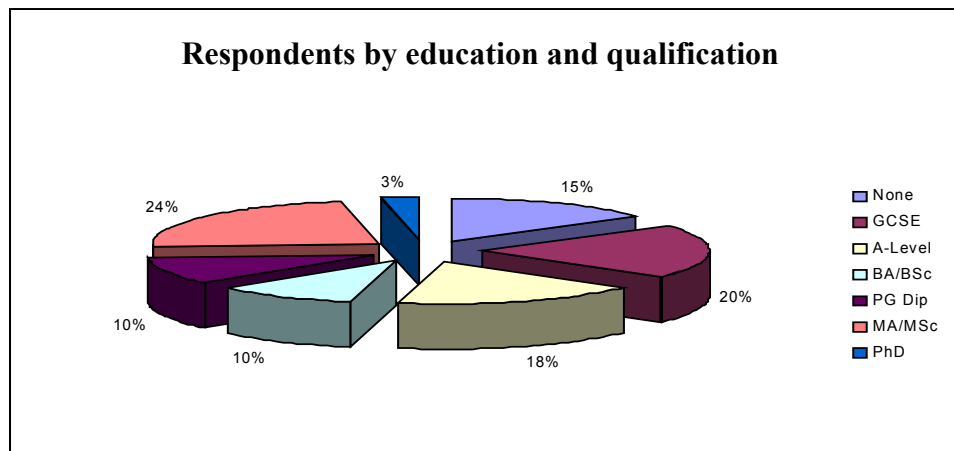
**Figure 3.1**



- 3.2. The majority of the respondents (52 per cent) were asylum seekers aged between 25 and 35 years old. 36-45 and 16-24 year-old asylum seekers were the second and third largest groups with 24 per cent and 17 per cent respectively. The sample mirrored the age groups in the asylum seeking population. According to the Home Office statistical reports (1999-2003), the majority of principal asylum applicants who have arrived in the UK since 1999 were young. Approximately two-thirds of asylum applicants in 1999, 2000 and 2001 were aged between 21 and 34 years. This age group made up more than three-quarters of asylum applicants in 2002. Home Office statistical reports estimate that over three-quarters of both male and female applicants in 1999, 2000, 2001 and 2002 were less than 35 years old.
- 3.3. A very high proportion of asylum seekers who responded to the survey was well educated and qualified. 90 per cent of the sample had qualifications ranging from equivalent of GCSEs to a PhD. 57 per cent had a degree and/or a postgraduate qualification; 37 per cent had postgraduate qualifications. Qualifications of asylum seekers tended, by and large, to mirror their age groups with younger people holding lower level qualifications and older people holding higher level qualifications. Many younger asylum seekers in the sample had no qualifications (26 per cent of 16-35 year-olds) compared to the older ones (5 per cent of 36-45 year-olds). Both men and women in the sample were highly qualified.

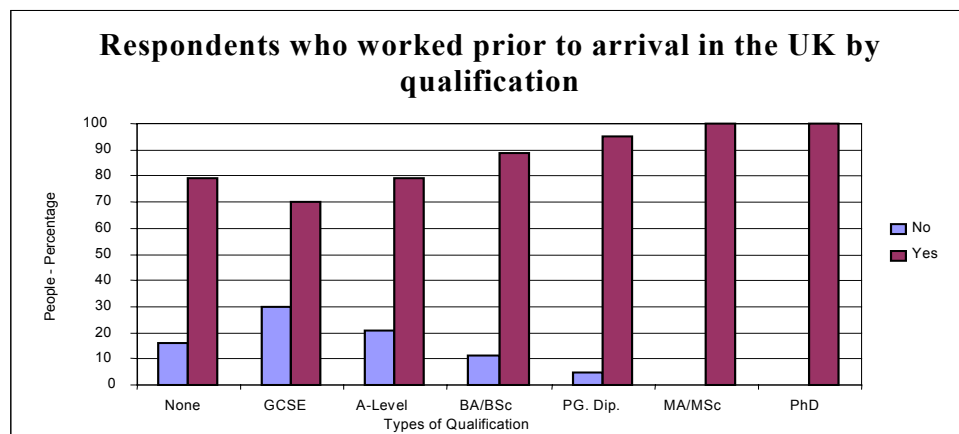
However, more women (60 per cent) in the sample had a degree or postgraduate qualification compared to men (55 per cent). Also, more men (13 per cent) had no qualifications compared to women (5 per cent). The vast majority (89 per cent) of asylum seekers in Scotland, compared to 46 per cent of the respondents from England, had a degree or a postgraduate qualification. The evidence from the Refugee Council-British Medical Association Refugee Doctors' Database, the Refugee Council-British Dental Association Refugee Dentists' Database and Royal College of Nursing Refugee Nurses Database also demonstrate that many refugees and asylum seekers do have useful qualifications and skills.

**Figure 3.2**



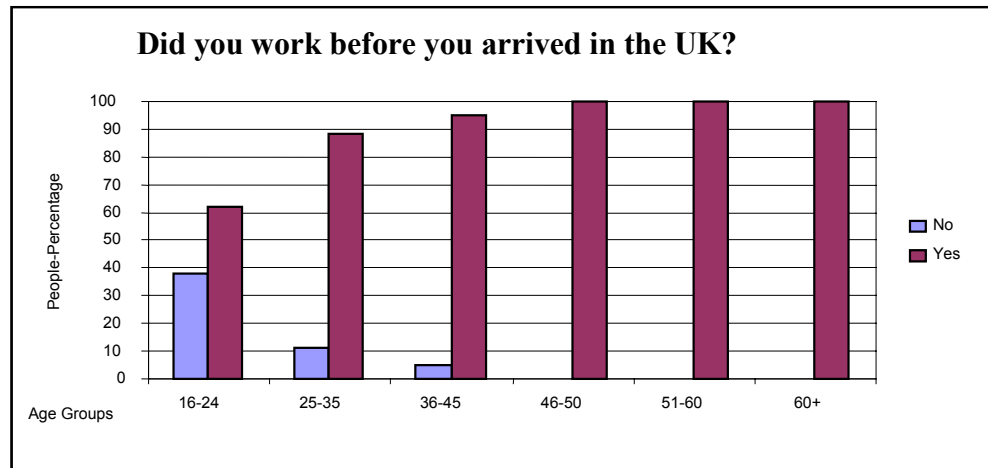
3.4. The vast majority of asylum seekers had overseas work experience. 86 per cent of the sample worked in their country or another country before they arrived in the UK. Only 13 per cent said they did not work prior to arrival in the UK. Both asylum seekers with qualifications and those without qualifications had worked overseas prior to their arrival in the UK. However, those with higher qualifications had higher employment rates. 30 per cent of the respondents with GCSEs (or equivalent) and 21 per cent of those with A-level equivalents said they did not work overseas before they came to the UK.

**Figure 3.3**



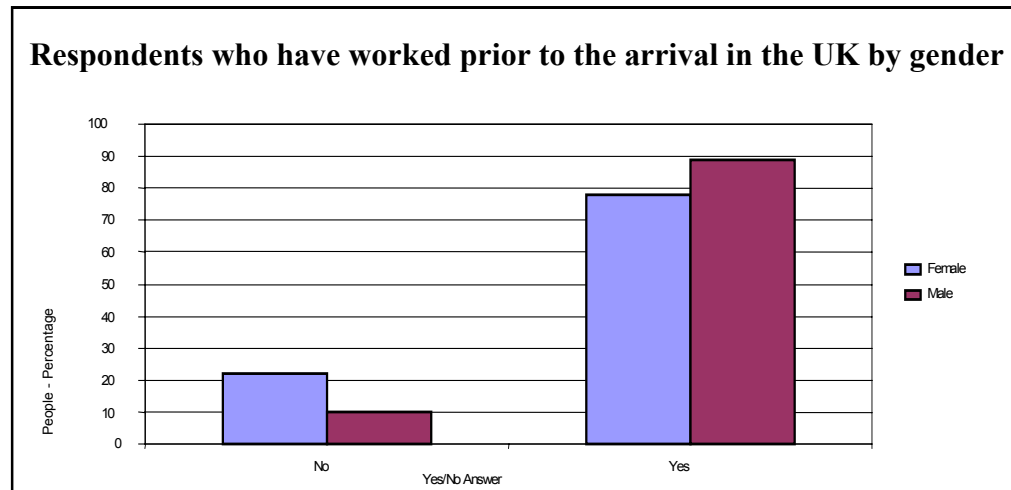
- 3.5. A higher percentage of older asylum seekers had worked overseas prior to arrival in the UK compared with younger ones (16-24 year-olds). 38 per cent of 16-24 year-olds said they had not worked overseas prior to arrival in the UK.

**Figure 3.4**



- 3.6. 89 per cent of male respondents, compared to 78 per cent of female respondents, worked overseas prior to their arrival in the UK. This difference could be due to caring responsibilities and/or cultural differences in gender roles.

**Figure 3.5**



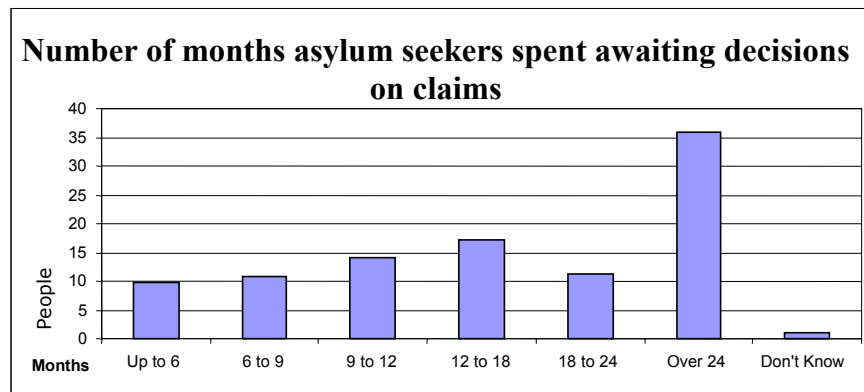
- 3.7. Also 98 per cent of asylum seekers in Scotland, compared to 82 per cent of asylum seekers in England, worked overseas before their arrival in the UK. Evidence from recent research reports suggest that asylum seekers bring with them a wealth of experience, overseas qualifications and useful skills (Greater London Authority (2002), Refugee Council (1999), Shiferaw and Hagos (2002), London Research and Information Centre (1999), Bloch (2002)).

## 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. ASYLUM DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

4.1.1. The majority of asylum seekers in the sample had waited for decisions on their asylum claims for considerable periods. 89 per cent of the 186 respondents had waited for more than 6 months. Among this group, 53 per cent had waited for 6-24 months and 36 per cent had waited for more than 24 months. Only 10 per cent of the respondents said they had been waiting for less than 6 months.

**Figure 4.1**

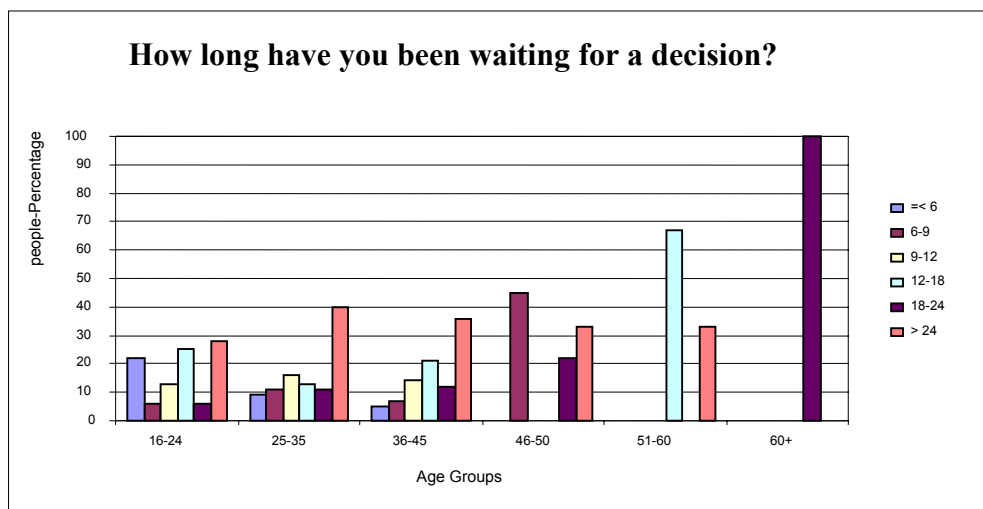


4.1.2. Analyses of the data on waiting times show there were gender differences. 83 per cent of women and 92 per cent of men had been waiting for a decision over 6 months. 43 per cent of women and 34 per cent of men had waited for a decision from the Home Office for more than 24 months. The waiting times also vary between the various age groups. 91 per cent of those in the 25-35 age group had waited for an answer from the Home Office over 6 months. Significantly, 40 per cent of 25-35 year-olds, which represents a simple majority in the sample with 52 per cent, had been waiting for over 24 months.

4.1.3. Over a third of the respondents in England and Scotland had waited for decisions on their asylum claims for over 24 months. However, 13 per cent of the sample in England were relatively new arrivals (who had waited for up to 6 months), compared to their counterparts in Scotland. Almost three-quarters (74 per cent) of respondents in Scotland had waited for over 12 months compared with under two-thirds (61 per cent) of the respondents in England. The majority of respondents in Scotland had waited longer periods: 16 per cent waited for 9-12 months; 18 per cent waited for 12-18 months; 20 per cent waited for 18-24 months and 36 per cent waited for over 24 months.

- 4.1.4. The Home Office received 356,280 asylum applications (made by principal applicants) between January 1999 and December 2003. Including dependants, the number of asylum applicants during the period was estimated to be 446,230. The Home Office made a very high percentage of initial decisions on asylum applications in 2000 (109,205 cases), 2001 (119,015 cases), 2002 (83,540 cases) and 2003 (64,605 cases). The Home Office equally made a very high, and gradually increasing, percentage of initial decisions on the asylum applications within six months in the last three years. However, the vast majority of initial asylum decisions in the last five years (1999-2003) resulted in a refusal of both asylum and Exceptional Leave to Remain (ELR). 87,990 (74 per cent) of decisions made by the Home Office in 2001 refused both asylum and ELR; that is 16 per cent more than the figure for 2000. In 2002, 55,130 (66 per cent) of initial decisions refused both asylum and ELR. In addition, 83 per cent of initial decisions in 2003 refused both asylum and ELR.
- 4.1.5. Home Office reports also show that a huge number of asylum applications have been outstanding at the end of each year. 101,500 asylum applications were outstanding at the end of 1999. The number of outstanding applications decreased to 89,100 in 2000 and dropped significantly to 42,200, 41,300 and 24,500 in 2001, 2002 and 2003 respectively.
- 4.1.6. The Home Office reports also suggested that tens of thousands of principal applicants appealed against a decision in 2000 (46,190), 2001 (74,365), 2002 (51,695) and 2003 (27,200). Shaw and Witkin (2004: P46) demonstrates the need to considerably improve the UK asylum decision-making process: "Home Office initial decision making in asylum claims is failing many applicants... Getting more decisions right first time will lead to fewer appeals, speedier results and lower costs". The report also made a number of recommendations which have the potential to improve the asylum decision-making process.

**Figure 4.2**

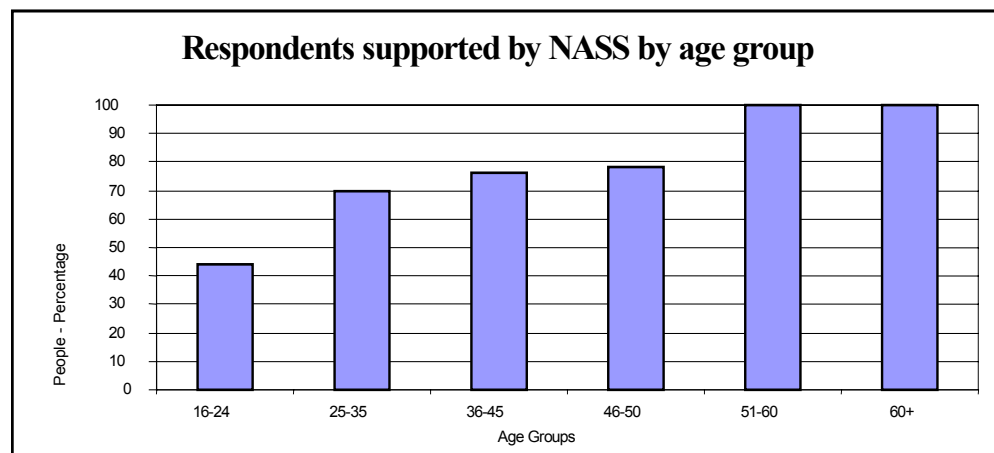


## 4.2. ASYLUM SUPPORT SYSTEM

4.2.1. Though the majority (68 per cent) of asylum seekers in the sample were being supported and accommodated by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS), a significant minority (27 per cent) were destitute and were being accommodated and supported by friends (9 per cent), social services departments (7 per cent), charities (4 per cent) and others (7 per cent). Only 5 per cent of the sample said they were accommodating and supporting themselves.

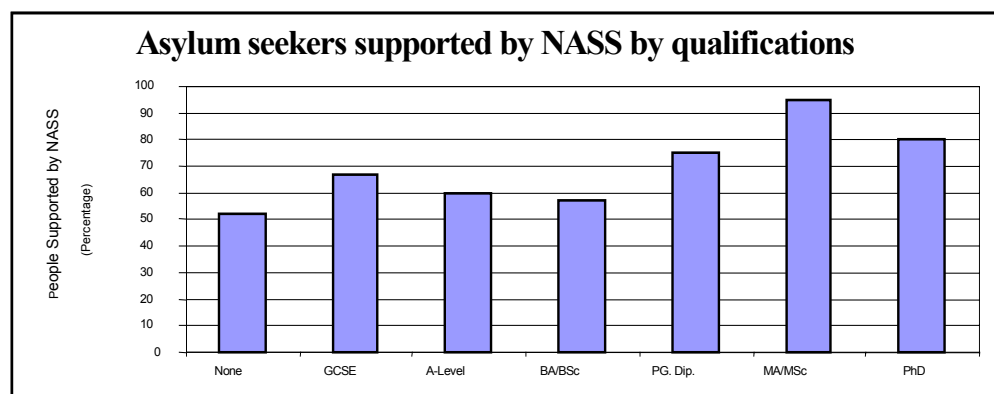
4.2.2. NASS was supporting asylum seekers of all the age groups in the study. The percentage of asylum seekers supported by NASS seemed to increase with their age. However, the majority (56 per cent) of 16-24 year-old asylum seekers were not supported by NASS.

**Figure 4.3**



4.2.3. The asylum seekers who said they were being supported by NASS included those with high level qualifications. However, asylum seekers with higher-level qualifications seemed to be more able to support themselves compared to those without qualifications or with low-level qualifications (GCSE or equivalent and A-level or equivalent).

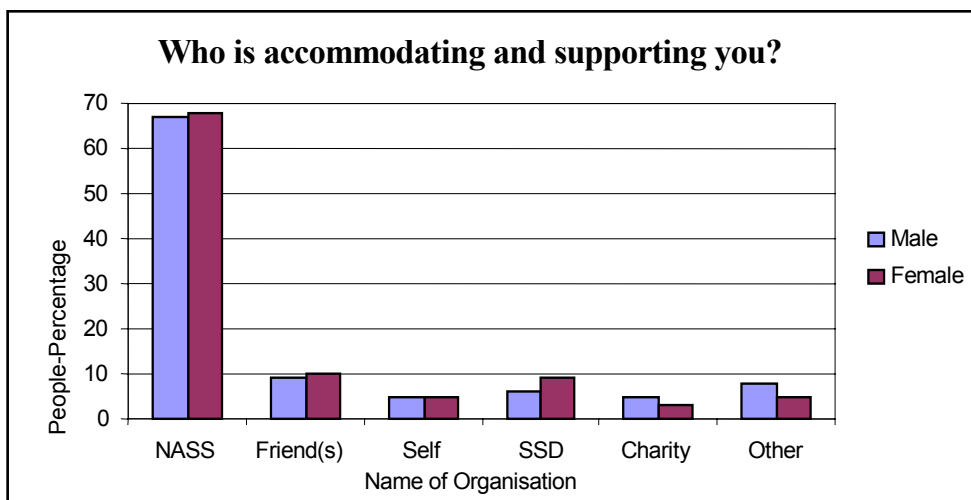
**Figure 4.4**



4.2.4. The vast majority of the respondents in Scotland (98 per cent), compared to only 59 per cent in England, were being supported by NASS. In other words, a significant proportion (41 per cent) of the sample in England were destitute and were either being supported by friends (12 per cent), social services departments (9 per cent), charities (6 per cent), others (8 per cent) or were supporting themselves (6 per cent).

4.2.5. NASS was supporting almost as many male as female asylum seekers (67 per cent and 68 per cent respectively). About a third of male and female respondents were being supported by others (28 per cent and 27 per cent respectively) or supporting themselves (5 per cent in each group).

**Figure 4.5**



4.2.6. The Home Office statistical reports show that NASS has supported the vast majority of asylum seekers in the last four years since it was established: 27,600 in 2000; 57,620 in 2001; 68,625 in 2002 and 80,120 in 2003. As at the end of March 2004, NASS was supporting 76,245 asylum seekers in the UK. The total number of asylum seekers in NASS dispersal accommodation was 48,610. NASS was also providing subsistence only support to 27,635 asylum seekers. The majority (19,850) of these asylum seekers lived in London. It is highly likely that NASS will make significant savings every year if asylum seekers are allowed to work.

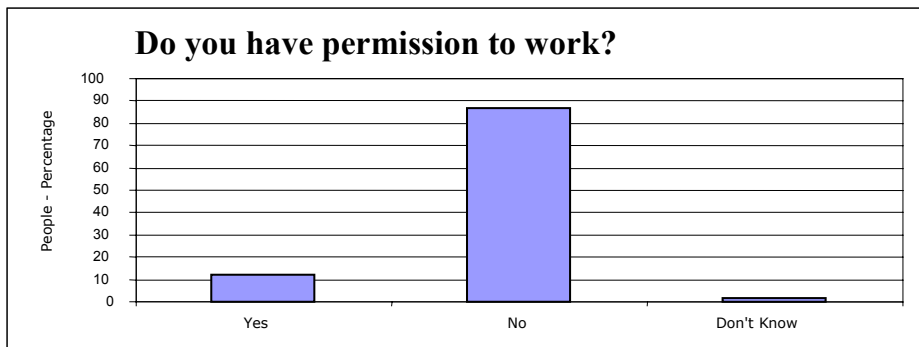
4.2.7. However, NASS also refused support and accommodation to a significant number of asylum seekers every year. According to Home Office statistical reports, NASS denied support to 310 asylum seekers in 2000, 4,990 in 2001 and 855 in 2002. A recent study also found that many asylum seekers denied support under Section 55 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 were "ending up on the streets" (The Refugee Council, 2004:p.17) and single female asylum seekers were "forced to sleep in very hostile environments"(p.18). These asylum seekers had to "rely entirely on soup kitchens, refugee agencies and handouts for food" (p.19); they "struggle[d] to find the money to make telephone calls or travel to appointments to see their legal representatives" (p.20) and

complained of such health problems associated with sleeping rough as “respiratory problems, skin complaints, muscle and joint problems and stomach and digestive disorders” (p 24).

### 4.3. ACCESS TO THE UK LABOUR MARKET

4.3.1. The survey found that the vast majority of asylum seekers did not have the employment concession or permission to work in the UK. 86 per cent of the sample said they did not have permission to work. Only 12 per cent of the sample had been granted permission to work. These individuals must have been granted permission to work prior to the withdrawal of the employment concession on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2002.

**Figure 4.6**



4.3.2. The vast majority of all age groups in the study did not have permission to work. The vast majority of the respondents with high level qualifications did not have permission to work. Also, 83 per cent of asylum seekers in England did not have permission to work. The situation in Scotland is even worse with 100 per cent of asylum seekers reporting no permission to work. Only 15 per cent of respondents in England said they did have permission to work. Almost as many male (86 per cent) as female asylum seekers (88 per cent) did not have permission to work. Only 13 per cent of male respondents, compared to 9 per cent of female respondents, said they had permission to work. This could be because the majority of principal asylum applicants were male.

4.3.3. Asylum seekers overwhelmingly supported the right to work. 92 per cent of the sample said the Home Office should allow asylum seekers to work. 25-35 year-old (94 per cent) and 36-45 year-old (93 per cent) respondents were more supportive of the right to work. The vast majority of asylum seekers with or without qualifications supported the right to work. Asylum seekers holding Master’s degrees and PhDs were even more supportive of the right to work.

4.3.4. More asylum seekers in England (94 per cent), compared to those living in Scotland (88 per cent), supported the right to work. Both female (95 per cent) and male (92 per cent) asylum seekers said the Home Office should allow asylum seekers to work. Evidence from recent research (Valtonen, 1999, Bloch 2002) suggests that these periods of labour market exclusion have longer-term adverse effects on their labour market experiences. It is

evident that the abolition of the employment concession will have longer-term adverse effects on the labour market participation of a significant proportion of asylum seekers.

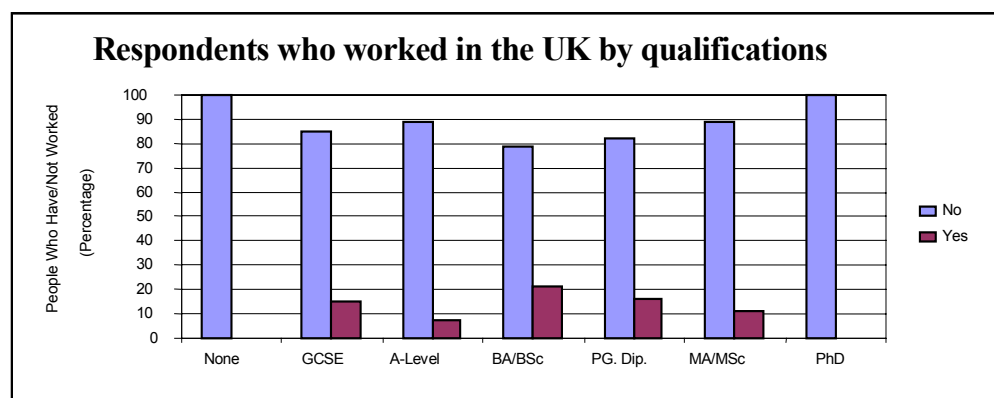
- 4.3.5. Asylum seekers who responded to the survey support the right to work for dependants. 82 per cent of the respondents said dependants of asylum seekers who were 16 years old or over should be allowed to work. The vast majority of 25-35 year-olds (84 per cent) said they should be allowed to work. Female (94 per cent) respondents were more supportive of the right to work for the dependents compared to male respondents (76 per cent). Moreover, 85 per cent of the sample in England said they support the right to work for dependants, compared to 73 per cent of those in Scotland. A significant minority (20 per cent) of asylum seekers in Scotland, compared to only 9 per cent in England, said they did not know. A small minority of men seem to be either opposed to the idea (8 per cent) or said they did not know (16 per cent).
- 4.3.6. Home Office statistical reports show that a considerable proportion of dependants arrived in the UK in the previous five years either accompanying or subsequently joining principal asylum applicants. The dependants were not eligible to work. However, such a policy could affect many asylum seekers given that over 15,000 dependants arrived in the UK in each of the five years prior to 2003 and many of them were 16 years old or over.
- 4.3.7. The majority of the sample wished to see asylum seekers allowed to work sooner, rather than later. 30 per cent said they should be allowed to work as from the first day of their asylum application, 25 per cent said as from 3 months from then and 32 per cent said as from 6 months from the date of their application. In other words, 87 per cent of respondents said asylum seekers should be allowed to work in the period between the first day of their asylum application and 6 months from the date of their application.
- 4.3.8. A significant proportion of 16-24 year-old (41 per cent) and 36-45 year-old (30 per cent) groups thought asylum seekers should be allowed to work from day 1 of their application. This view was supported by 28 per cent of 25-35 year-olds who represented a majority in the sample. A significant proportion of 25-35 year-old respondents (37 per cent) thought asylum seekers should be allowed to work after six months. However, about a quarter (24 per cent) of this age group thought asylum seekers should be allowed to work after three months from their application. The minority of asylum seekers said they should be allowed to work after a year.
- 4.3.9. About a third of the respondents in England (35 per cent), compared to 14 per cent of those in Scotland, said asylum seekers should be allowed to work from the first day of their application. The majority of respondents from Scotland said they should be allowed to work after 6 months from their application.

4.3.10. Qualifications, or lack of them, did not seem to influence the opinions of the respondents and their responses to the question. About half (42 per cent) of respondents without qualifications said asylum seekers should be allowed to work 6 months after making their application. That opinion was shared by a significant proportion of respondents with qualifications. However, many GCSE (or equivalent) holders (40 per cent) and BA/BSc holders (34 per cent) said they should be allowed to work from day 1 of their applications. This view was supported by 29 per cent of A-level holders, 25 per cent of postgraduate diploma holders, 32 per cent of MA/MSc holders and 16 per cent of those without qualifications.

4.3.11. There were no significant differences of opinion between female and male respondents on when the right to work should be given to asylum seekers.

4.3.12. The vast majority (86 per cent) of the sample said they had never worked since arrival in the UK. Only 13 per cent of the sample said they had worked in the UK. 98 per cent of respondents from Scotland and 82 per cent of their England counterparts said they did not have permission to work. Only 2 per cent in Scotland and 17 per cent in England said they had permission to work. Almost as many female (86 per cent) as male (85 per cent) respondents said they did not have permission to work. Only 14 per cent of male and 12 per cent of female respondents said they had permission to work. Asylum seekers who worked in the UK had qualifications ranging from GCSE equivalent to an MA/MSc. More asylum seekers with a degree and/or postgraduate qualifications, compared to those without or with low-level qualifications, said they had worked in the UK.

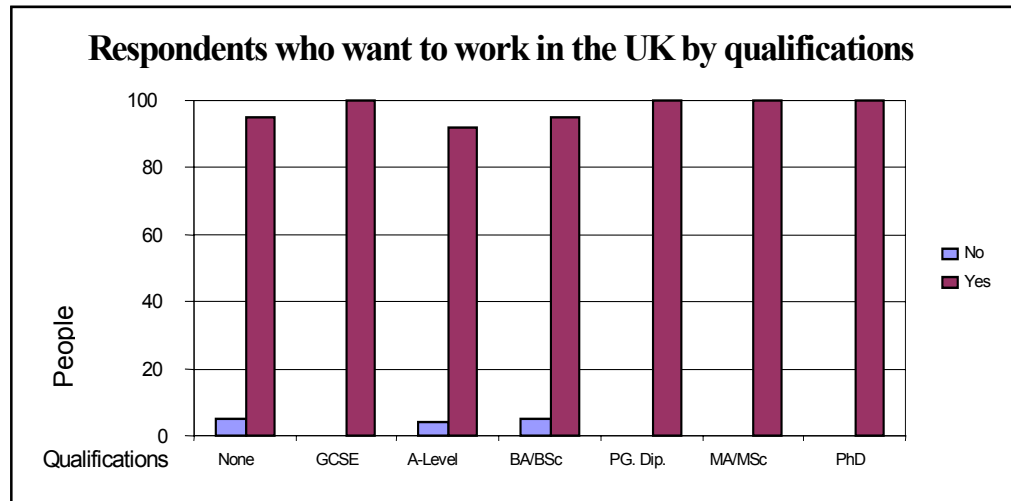
**Figure 4.7**



4.3.13. An overwhelming majority of the sample (97 per cent) wanted to work. This finding is in line with that of a recent Home Office study (Robinson, Vaughn et al, 2002). It found that "The large majority actively wanted to work and did not wish to live on welfare benefits" (p53). Only 6per cent of 16-24 year-olds said they do not want to work. Both asylum seekers with and without qualifications said they wanted to work in the UK. 100 per cent of respondents from Scotland and 97 per cent from England said

they wanted to work. The vast majority of both male and female asylum seekers said they wanted to work in the UK. Lack of permission to work affected the majority (85 per cent) of the sample's motivation to work, volunteer, study or train.

**Figure 4.8**



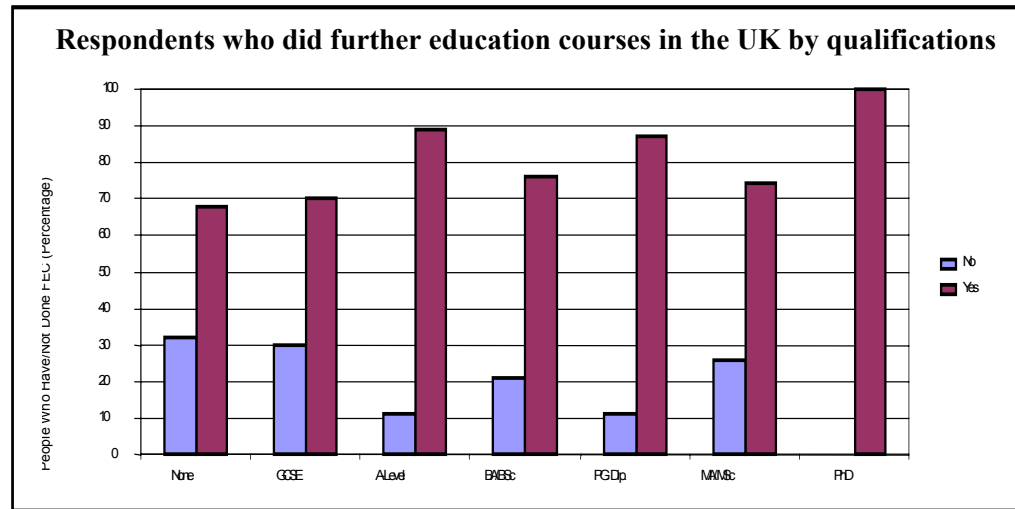
#### 4.4. ACCESS TO FURTHER EDUCATION

4.4.1. The vast majority of the sample (79 per cent) had done further education courses since arrival in the UK. Several respondents, though they were not asked to specify the course they followed, mentioned English language course. However, about 20 per cent of the sample said they had not done any further education courses since their arrival in the UK. The vast majority of asylum seekers who attended further education courses were 25 years old or over. It was rather surprising that 28 per cent of 16-24 year-olds in the sample had not done any further education courses. A recent Home Office study (Robinson et al, 2002) suggested "Education was generally most important for those in the 16-24 age bracket".

4.4.2. Paradoxically, a significant proportion of the asylum seekers who said they had not done any further education course since their arrival in the UK were those who needed education most: they were either people without any qualifications (32 per cent) or with low-level (GCSE or equivalent) qualifications (30 per cent). Respondents with higher-level qualifications had higher participation rate in further education. This is not a new discovery. Bloch (2002:p70) found that:

Participation in education among refugees was related to English language proficiency, age, activity before coming to Britain and levels of education...those who were studying for a qualification at the time of the survey were, for the most part, either fluent in spoken and written English or had a fairly good command of the language. Those studying also tended to be young. The largest proportion studying at the time of the survey were aged 18-24. A larger proportion of those studying at the time of the survey had been students (26 per cent) or working (22 per cent) than had been engaged in any other activity. Finally, nearly everyone (83 per cent) who was studying had also been educated up to secondary education or higher before arriving in Britain.

**Figure 4.9**



4.4.3. The participation rate of asylum seekers in further education was very high in both Scotland (87 per cent) and England (76 per cent). However, a significant minority of the sample in England (23 per cent) had not been able to access learning opportunities. The participation rate of asylum seekers in further education was very high for both female (81 per cent) and male (77 per cent).

4.4.4. The experience of ASSET UK Development Partnership and a recent report (Audit Commission (2000: p74) suggest refugees and asylum seekers are keen to learn. However, ESOL courses tended to be in short supply: "These courses are often free (or charge low fees) but can be in short supply. In some areas, ESOL courses are heavily over-subscribed; several authorities visited had waiting lists of over 200 people." There is a strong case for widening participation of asylum seekers in lifelong learning: there is a clear link between learning, economic success and social cohesion (Kennedy,1997:p15):

Learning is central to economic success and social cohesion...Those who are disadvantaged educationally are also disadvantaged economically and socially; equity and viability dictate that all should have the opportunity to succeed.

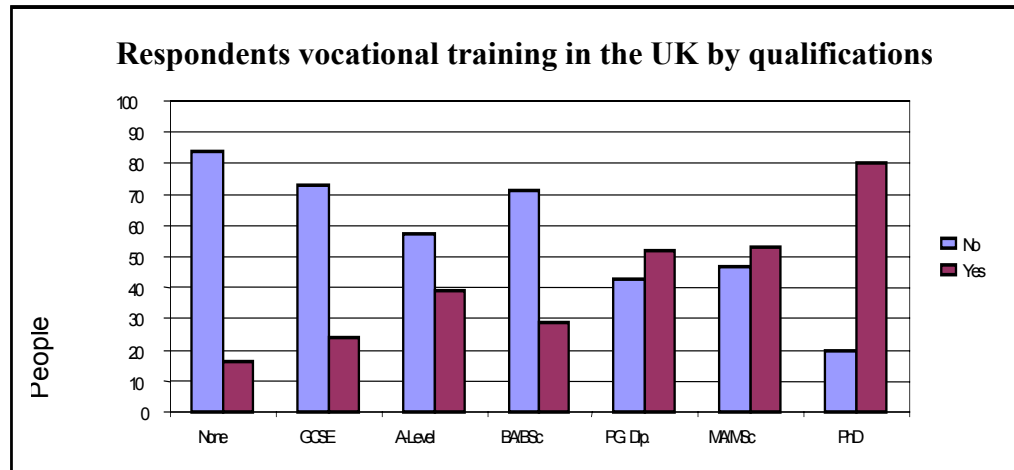
4.4.5. Asylum seekers need access to learning opportunities to be able to improve their employability, to participate in the UK labour market and to become independent.

#### **4.5. ACCESS TO VOCATIONAL TRAINING**

4.5.1. 60 per cent of the sample said they had never done any vocational training or training for work since their arrival in the UK. The vast majority of the respondents who said they had not done any vocational training or training for work were either those without qualifications or with low-level (GCSE or equivalent) qualifications. Also, the vast majority of 16-24 year-old respondents (72 per cent) had not done any vocational training or

training for work in the UK. Participation rates of asylum seekers with a degree or postgraduate qualification was higher (29 per cent BA/BSc, 52 per cent Postgraduate Diploma, 53 per cent MA/MSc and 80 per cent PhD).

**Figure 4.10**



4.5.2. About two thirds (63 per cent) of respondents in England and half of those in Scotland had not done any vocational training or training for work in the UK. The majority of both, female respondents (66 per cent) and their male counterparts (57 per cent), had not done any vocational training in the UK. The participation rates of these groups in vocational training were 31 per cent and 41 per cent respectively. Bloch (2002:p85) found that "There was demand for training among refugees". However, they faced multiple barriers to vocational training and employment. Bloch (2002:p83) cited "a lack of information available about training, practical barriers to participation (travel and childcare), barriers created by anxiety, lack of familiarity with localities and procedures and a lack of confidence" as well as eligibility for training. Lack of knowledge of English or inadequate English language skills is another major barrier to training (Bloch, 2002). Currently asylum seekers are not eligible for New Deal and Work-based Learning for Adults (WBLA) programmes and other Jobcentre Plus services. Refugees who follow vocational programmes such as New Deal and Work-based Learning for Adults tend to experience difficulties even after their successful completion of these courses (Bloch, 2002). For this reason, job outcomes achieved by training providers working with refugees tend to be low and ways of improving them need to be explored.

#### **4.6. ACCESS TO VOLUNTEERING**

4.6.1. The Home Office changed their policy on volunteering for asylum seekers with effect from April 2000. Since then, asylum seekers have been allowed to volunteer, provided that: (a) "the activity being undertaken by an asylum seeker is genuinely voluntary and amounts neither to employment or job substitution" and (b) "reimbursement should be for meal or travel costs actually incurred, not as a flat rate allowance" (Home Office, 2000).

4.6.2. However, the barriers to volunteering for asylum seekers are huge<sup>1</sup>. According to Wilson, R (2003:p27), the barriers to volunteering that they face include the following:

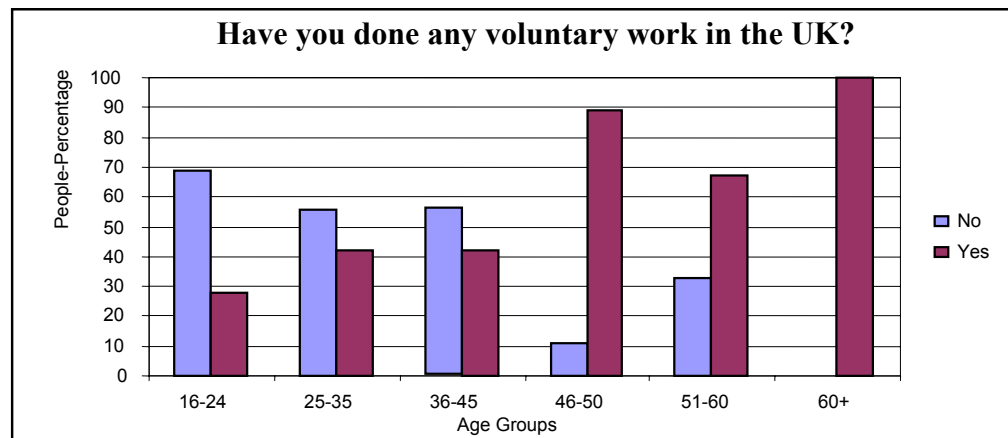
- Lack of information about opportunities
- Concern that skills and qualifications have no value in the UK
- Differing cultural perceptions of 'volunteering'
- Prejudice about working with people of other cultures
- Poor knowledge of English
- Busy doing informal work in community
- Feeling transient and unable to commit
- Lack of confidence and self-esteem
- Anxiety about future
- Expectation of deportation
- Disability; illness
- Depression
- Responsibilities of caring for family members
- Poverty
- Lack of knowledge of right to volunteering expenses, or embarrassment about claiming expenses
- Difficulties getting a reference
- Preferring to get a job, even if badly paid
- Going to college

4.6.3. The barriers to volunteering for asylum seekers need to be addressed. The Home Office's policy and guidance on volunteering for asylum seekers can only make a difference to asylum seekers and their host communities if they are given the support they need to overcome these hurdles.

4.6.4. Although over 40 per cent of the sample said they had done voluntary work in the UK, the majority said they had not done any voluntary work since arrival in the UK. The vast majority (69 per cent) of young (16-24 year-old) respondents had not done any voluntary work since their arrival in the UK. Also, 56 per cent of 25-35 and 36-45 year-old asylum seekers in the sample had not volunteered in the UK. The majority of asylum seekers who said they had done voluntary work in the UK were aged 46-50 (89 per cent) and 51-60 (67 per cent).

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<sup>1</sup> View the document on <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/docs2/compactannrep2003.pdf>. Check [www.volunteering.org.uk](http://www.volunteering.org.uk) for further information.

**Figure 4.11**

4.6.5. Compared to those without qualifications, asylum seekers with qualifications had the propensity to engage in voluntary work. The majority of those who volunteered were asylum seekers who held higher-level qualifications (80 per cent PhD, 68 per cent MA/MSc, 59 per cent Postgraduate Diploma or 50 per cent BA/BSc). The vast majority of asylum seekers in the sample who had not done any voluntary work in the UK were those either without qualifications (84 per cent) or with low-level qualifications (82 per cent for GCSE holders and 68 per cent for A-level holders).

4.6.6. Compared to those in Scotland (41 per cent), the majority (61 per cent) of asylum seekers in England had not done any voluntary work since their arrival in the UK. More men (58 per cent), compared to women (53 per cent), in the sample said they had not done any voluntary work since their arrival in the UK. 45 per cent of women, compared to only 40 per cent of men, said they volunteered.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1. The survey suggests asylum seekers have an untapped economic potential. First, a very high proportion of the respondents was well educated and qualified. Bloch (2002) found that 96 per cent of asylum seekers and refugees "had participated in formal education before coming to Britain" and that 56 per cent of the respondents who arrived in Britain "aged 18 or over had a qualification on arrival of which 23 per cent had a degree or higher". Second, the vast majority of these respondents had overseas work experience. Evidence from recent research reports supports this finding, too. Bloch (2002) found that prior to their arrival in the UK, "42 per cent of respondents were working" and they most often did "shop-keeping, teaching, office and clerical work, trades, farming and catering" as well as "a number of professional jobs including doctors, dentists, engineers and accountants". Third, the vast majority of asylum seekers are young. The

majority of the respondents (52 per cent) were asylum seekers aged between 25 and 35 years old. 36-45 and 16-24 year-old asylum seekers were the second and third largest groups with 24 per cent and 17 per cent respectively. The sample mirrors the age groups in the asylum seeking population. The majority of principal asylum applicants who had arrived in the UK since 1999 were young (Home Office, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003). Approximately two-thirds of asylum applicants in 1999, 2000 and 2001 were aged between 21 and 34 years old. This age group made up more than three-quarters of asylum applicants in 2002. It is evident that asylum seekers have the potential to supply a relatively younger workforce at the time when the UK is concerned about its ageing workforce (National Statistics Office, 2003) and employers can effectively utilise their skills at this time when there are skill deficiencies (Learning and Skills Council, 2003) in the UK labour market.

- 5.2. It does not seem the Home Office has been able to make decisions on all asylum claims quickly in spite of the concerted efforts it exerted to accelerate the asylum decision-making process. The survey suggests some asylum seekers still wait for initial decisions on their claims for considerable periods. The majority of asylum seekers in the sample had waited for decisions on their asylum claims for more than six months and more than one-third of the sample had waited for over 24 months.
- 5.3. Many asylum seekers are highly motivated and want to work. Asylum seekers overwhelmingly support the right to work for both principal applicants (92 per cent) and dependants (82 per cent). The majority of the sample wished to see asylum seekers allowed to work sooner, rather than later. Evidence from a recent research also suggests that asylum seekers were willing to take jobs that are well below their skills and qualifications; with less pay and even with poor terms and conditions (Bloch, 2002):

Terms and conditions of employment were poor and notably worse than that experienced by ethnic minority people. One-quarter of refugees were in temporary posts, mostly because they could not find a permanent job. This differed from ethnic minorities where fewer - eleven per cent - were in temporary posts and only 31 per cent took a temporary job because they could not find a permanent post. Only 47 per cent of refugees were entitled to holiday pay compared with 92 per cent of their ethnic minority counterparts and they were also less likely to be offered training (33 per cent and 52 per cent respectively).

- 5.4. The vast majority of these asylum seekers did not have permission to work. Prior to July 2002, they would have been eligible and many of them would have applied for and obtained the employment concession and some would have been in employment and supporting themselves and the UK economy. Lack of concession to work does not only affect asylum seekers' ability to secure paid employment but it also undermines their ability to support themselves and encourages their dependence on the state for accommodation and support. 86 per cent of the sample has never worked since arrival in the UK. The majority of the sample was being supported by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) and others because they were deemed destitute. If these asylum seekers were granted permission to

work, NASS and other support providers would not have supported as many asylum seekers and incurred such a huge expenditure.

- 5.5. Although a significant proportion of asylum seekers were able to maintain their motivation to study, volunteer, train or work, 85 per cent of the respondents reported that lack of permission to work affected their motivation to work, volunteer, study or train. Bloch (2002) suggests that asylum seekers and refugees are keen to learn English; her study found that "Nearly two-thirds (65 per cent) of respondents had studied one or more English language course of which 23 per cent were studying at the time of the survey". The research also found that 60 per cent of the asylum seekers and refugees who responded to the survey were interested in training. Bloch (2002) also found that "Twenty nine per cent of the respondents had been involved in voluntary work in Britain". However, English language was an important factor in volunteering; "Those who were more proficient in English were more likely to be involved in voluntary work than were others". The barriers to volunteering that asylum seekers and refugees face are numerous (Wilson, R 2003:p27).
- 5.6. The survey suggests a significant minority of asylum seekers were not engaging in further education (FE). 20 per cent of the sample had not done any FE courses since their arrival in the UK 16-24 year-old asylum seekers in the sample seem to be disproportionately over-represented in the group of asylum seekers who said they had not done any further education courses. This is rather surprising given that a recent Home Office study (Robinson et al, 2002) suggests "Education was generally most important for those in the 16-24 age bracket".
- 5.7. Moreover, the vast majority of the sample (60 per cent) had not done any vocational training since their arrival in the UK. Access to vocational training seemed to be more difficult for 16-24 year-old asylum seekers in the sample (72 per cent), asylum seekers without qualifications and women (66 per cent).
- 5.8. The majority of the sample had not done any voluntary work since arrival in the UK. Access to volunteering was more problematic for 16-24 year-olds (69 per cent), 25-35 and 36-45 year-old groups (56 per cent), those without qualifications (84 per cent) or those with low-level qualifications (82 per cent) and those who lived in England (61 per cent).
- 5.9. There is little evidence to suggest that employment is a pull factor. According to the Home Office research study 243, *Understanding the Decision-Making of Asylum Seekers* (p vii) "Many of those in the sample were fleeing persecution, violence or threats of violence. They were therefore more concerned about escaping from their country of origin than they were about which country they would eventually seek refuge in". Robinson, V et al (2002:p53) reported that "Many respondents did not expect to start working immediately upon arrival in the UK". According to the report "only two respondents actually knew that asylum seekers were not allowed to undertake paid employment during their first six months in

the UK". The majority expected "they will have to work" and will be allowed to find work in the UK "to support themselves and meet living costs" only in the longer term. The study also found that "In the vast majority of cases employment did not play a dominant role in the decision to undertake migration from the country of origin or the choice of the UK as a destination". Only "three of the Eastern European respondents had used the asylum route because they thought this was an easier way of gaining entry to the UK to work" (p54). It emphasises that "There was little evidence that interviewees had targeted the UK because it was thought to offer better employment opportunities" (p55).

- 5.10. The Home Office's refugee integration strategy is pursuing noble aims. However, the process of refugee integration needs to start at the time when they are still asylum seekers. This would ensure that asylum seekers who are recognised as refugees are easily integrated into society and the labour market. Those who are refused asylum and return to their countries of origin would also go back with skills and experience that would make it easier for them to work there.

## **6. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 6.1. The Home Office should allow asylum seekers and their dependants who are 16 years old or over to work to ensure they access the UK labour market, support themselves, their families and local businesses and contribute to the UK economic growth. ASSET UK Development Partnership (DP) strongly advises that the permission to work should be given to asylum seekers preferably from the first day of their application for asylum and no later than six months from the date of the claim. Such policy will not only ensure asylum seekers achieve their full potential and pay something back to the UK but also change negative perceptions about and project a positive image of asylum seekers which in turn could impact on community cohesion.
- 6.2. The Home Office and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to reinstate the eligibility of asylum seekers to participate in government-funded work-related programmes, such as New Deal and Work-based Learning for Adults, and to allow asylum seekers, especially 16-24 year-old asylum seekers; those without qualifications and women, to access vocational training.
- 6.3. The Home Office to exert more efforts to enable asylum seekers to engage in voluntary work to be able to invest in their local communities, support local businesses and acquire knowledge, experience and skills that help their integration once they become refugees or reintegration once they are returned to their countries of origin. One of ASSET UK DP partners, NIACE, is running a very successful Skills Audit pilot project in East Midlands which helped many asylum seekers to access voluntary work and gain useful UK work experience. Such projects are needed to promote volunteering for asylum seekers and funding should be made available to ensure they are widely available.

- 6.4. The Home Office, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the national Learning and Skills Council and the Scottish Executive to put specific measures in place to widen participation of asylum seekers, especially 16-24 year-old asylum seekers; those without qualifications and women, in further education (FE) and enable them to learn English; acquire other useful skills and improve their employability. Pilot projects of partners of ASSET UK Development Partnership such as the Basic Skills Agency, the Refugee Council's Training and Employment Section (TES) and Sheffield College's ESOL programmes in Sheffield, Peterborough, Cardiff and Birmingham help asylum seekers learn general English as well as English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Many asylum seekers will benefit from, and funding should be targeted at, such projects that provide English language learning opportunities to meet their diverse needs.
- 6.5. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the national Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to:
- (a) Increase ESOL provision for asylum seekers, especially community-based ESOL provision,
  - (b) Considerably reduce the current long waiting lists in colleges;
  - (c) Ensure the ESOL provision meets the needs of asylum seekers and employers and the national quality standards;
  - (d) Ensure other FE learning programmes take into consideration the ESOL needs of asylum seekers on mainstream courses and provide additional support for them to help them up-skill;
  - (e) Ensure citizenship courses are made available to asylum seekers integrating, where possible, such courses with English language and tailor it to their needs to prepare them for life in the UK and/or to be able to meet the UK citizenship requirements when they become eligible for UK citizenship; and
  - (f) Improve accessibility of ESOL learning programmes.
- 6.6. The Home Office should review its integration policy and strategy to ensure they aim to encourage asylum seekers to improve their employability and work while they are awaiting consideration of their applications. It makes economic sense for refugee integration strategies to support the needs of asylum seekers as well as refugees. Such strategies could serve a dual purpose for asylum seekers:
- (a) Help integrate asylum seekers into the UK labour market and society and ensure they support themselves, support local businesses and contribute to the UK economy and
  - (b) Help reintegrate failed asylum seekers into the labour markets in their home countries once they are returned.

- 6.7. The Home Office to commission further research to carry out the cost-benefit analyses of the withdrawal of concession to work and its impact on asylum seekers to help the government develop an evidence-based policy.

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