



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

RESEARCH

ReStart: Refugee Integration, Employer Engagement Opportunities (summary)

This research aims to understand the local/regional labour market skill gaps and opportunities for refugees to increase their employment prospects within Wales.

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1. Introduction and study aims

Those given refugee status can work in the United Kingdom (UK) and many want to work, but employment rates for refugees lag far behind those people born in the UK (WG, 2020a, Kone et al., 2019). This research aims to understand the local/regional labour market skill gaps and opportunities, to increase the employment prospects for refugees within the four main dispersal areas of Wales (Cardiff, Newport, Swansea and Wrexham). The intention is to develop a practical report which identifies feasible activities that could be delivered within the ReStart: Refugee Integration Project and other forms of skills, employability and enterprise support.

2. Approach and methods

This was a mixed methods study, drawing upon data collected through:

- scoping reviews of recent research into refugee populations in the UK,

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research into best practice in developing the employment prospects of refugees, analysis of labour market trends and forecasts

- semi-structured interviews, with a purposive sample of 32 stakeholders representing the ReStart project, employment support services, public, private and voluntary sector employers, employer bodies and trade unions, and the voluntary sector

Data collected from these sources was triangulated and emerging findings presented for discussion and validation by stakeholders, in two online workshops.

3. Labour market opportunities in Cardiff, Newport, Swansea and Wrexham

Many refugees want to continue working in the sector or profession they were in before fleeing persecution. However, given barriers to employment, such as weak English language skills and employer practices that can discriminate against refugees, it is often very difficult, and sometimes impossible, for refugees to continue working in the same sector, at the same level, in Wales. Therefore, their willingness to consider alternatives, typically entry level jobs, where barriers to entry are lower and employer demand is high, can determine whether they enter work or not (WG, 2020a). This means that an analysis of skill gaps and labour market opportunities for refugees needs to have a dual focus, upon access to entry level jobs in the short term, and identifying progression opportunities for those refugees who want to, and are able to, progress, to help them realise their employment aspirations over the longer term.

The analysis of employment opportunities focused upon three broad categories of jobs, in sectors where there is forecast to be strong demand from employers:

- 'entry level' jobs, where barriers to entry, such as expectations around language skills and qualifications, are low but where pay, conditions and progression opportunities are also often poor (meaning refugees can often get stuck and struggle to progress)
- 'mid-level' jobs that offer progression opportunities, where barriers to entry,

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such as expectations around language skills and qualifications, are moderate but where pay, conditions and progression opportunities are also higher

- 'higher level' jobs that offer progression opportunities, where barriers to entry, such as expectations around language skills and qualifications, are high but where pay, conditions and progression opportunities are also high

The qualitative research for this study identified that key entry level positions include retail, hospitality, food and drink, cleaning, construction, security, manufacturing, warehouse and driving and delivery. Most of these positions would require refugees to have English language skills at around Entry Level 2[1] and, as one employer put it, the right 'approach and attitude'. Some sectors, such as construction, security and driving also require certificates or licences to practise, even at entry level.

The qualitative research for this study also identified that, other than health and social care and skilled construction and manufacturing roles, it is more difficult to identify mid-level opportunities where barriers to employment are moderate, and demand from employers is high. Most of these positions would require refugees to have Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) Level 2 or 3 qualifications and to have passed the Wales Essential Skills Test (WEST). The limited range of mid-level opportunities reflects the 'hollowing out' of the UK labour market (with an increase in higher level and, to a lesser degree, entry level jobs, but a reduction in mid-level jobs) (Luchinskaya and Green, 2016).

The strongest employment growth is forecast for positions at Level 4 and above, and there are higher level progression opportunities in, for example, science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) sectors, where demand is forecast to be high, such as the life sciences (including pharmaceuticals), semi-conductor and fintech (financial services technology) sectors in south east Wales in particular (WG, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d). However, these sectors also have higher barriers to entry, including demand for higher level qualifications (e.g. a higher apprenticeship (Level 4 or 5), degree apprenticeship (Level 6 or 7), Honours (Level 6) or Master's degree (Level 7), fluency in English and higher expectations about employees' cultural skills and knowledge.

Both the qualitative research for this study and literature included in the scoping

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review (for example, WG, 2020a) identifies that self-employment, including commercial and social enterprises, is an option for some refugees, particularly for those with experience of having run their own businesses. Opting for self-employment may reduce some barriers to employment, as it may not require such strong language skills, but it also creates new barriers, such as access to finance, and refugees can get trapped in economically marginal work (see for example, Kone et al., 2019).

There is considerable uncertainty about future employment (and self-employment) opportunities. COVID-19 and social distancing requirements have had a significant effect on a number of entry level sectors such as retail, hospitality, food and drink and construction, and the effects upon sectors such as hospitality may persist even as lockdown is eased. However, sectors such as delivery and driving have been boosted by these restrictions (Dias et al., 2020). The impact of exiting the European Union (EU) will depend upon the exit arrangements negotiated with the EU. Research by the Welsh Government has stated that a so called 'hard' Brexit at the end of the transition period, if there is no trade deal agreed by 31st December 2020, may hit export sectors, such as automotive and aerospace industries (and therefore limit some higher level opportunities), already adversely affected by COVID-19 (WG, 2019c). If, as forecast, unemployment rises and demand for labour is weak (given the economic impact of COVID-19 and in 'hard' Brexit scenarios), it is likely to be harder to engage employers in recruiting those, such as refugees, seen as riskier and potentially costlier to recruit and employ than other groups. Conversely, restrictions on European economic migrants (as a result of the UK's exit from the EU) may reduce the labour supply, and therefore competition, particularly for entry level jobs (Walsh and McNeil, 2020).

[1] Weak or limited Welsh language skills were very rarely mentioned as a barrier to employment. This is likely to reflect the focus upon the four dispersal areas, Cardiff, Newport, Swansea and Wrexham, where Welsh is less widely spoken than some other part of Wales. In contrast, the Refugee Employment Skills Support Study (WG, 2020a), which covered all of Wales, found more, albeit still limited, evidence of the need for Welsh language skills in order to access and progress in work, particularly in north Wales.

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4. Increasing the employment opportunities for refugees

The research reviewed for this study is clear that action to increase employment opportunities for refugees needs to focus on both employers and support services for refugees. It also identifies that action should be founded upon a genuine partnership between employers and support services, to ensure that support services fully understand employers' needs and expectations, and ensure that they are effective in informing and advising employers, who often lack experience and expertise in recruiting and employing refugees (Gibb, 2018; Szkudlarek, 2019).

Both the qualitative research for this study (i.e. interviews with stakeholders) and the literature included in the scoping review (e.g. Gibb, 2018; Szkudlarek, 2019) also identify that action to improve refugees' employment prospects and experiences needs to focus upon:

- **preparing for employment**, given the barriers to entry that refugees face. Pre-employment support for refugees should focus upon work-readiness and matching refugees with employment opportunities, and also working with employers to remove unnecessary barriers linked to recruitment and selection
- **sustaining employment**, given the risks that a non-inclusive workplace culture may lead to refugees leaving their employment (due, for example, to feeling they do not “fit in”). Post-employment support for both refugees and employers can help sustain employment
- **supporting progression in employment**, given the danger of refugees getting stuck in entry level jobs (which limits their lives and their potential contribution to Wales). This can be helped by supporting progression with an existing employer or with a new employer and/or sector and also by improving the quality of work, through national action to promote fair and ethical employment, and to increase equality and diversity in the workforce

The qualitative research for this study also highlights some key challenges and structural constraints upon action to increase employment opportunities for refugees, including:

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- the volume and type of employment opportunities in each dispersal area, and concerns that COVID-19 and/or the UK's exit from the EU may reduce opportunities for refugees
- the need for action by employers (for example, to change recruitment practices and workplace cultures), and the challenges inherent in engaging employers
- the time it can take (often years) before refugees are 'work ready'

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Employment opportunities for refugees

Most refugees face significant barriers to finding work, most notably insufficient English language skills, and also limited cultural competence and understanding of Welsh workplaces, and/or an under-valuing or lack of recognition (by employers) of qualifications, skills and/or experience gained overseas (WG, 2020a). They can therefore be perceived by employers as a potentially risky, and potentially costlier, group to recruit and manage (Gibb, 2018; Szkudlarek, 2019). Therefore, in the short-term, in order to find work many refugees have to focus upon low skilled “entry level” jobs in areas such as warehousing, hospitality and food processing, where demand for labour is high and entry barriers to employment are low.

Entry level jobs, together with further education (FE), including English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and work-based learning (WBL), should provide a stepping stone to progressing to more highly skilled work in sectors such as health and social care, where demand for labour outstrips supply. However, currently too many refugees appear to get stuck in entry level jobs, so they become 'dead ends' (Kone et al., 2019; WG, 2020a). Therefore, both the qualitative research for this study and literature included in the scoping review (for example, Gibb, 2018; Szkudlarek, 2019) identifies that a focus upon pre-employment support needs to be complemented by a strong focus upon supporting progression in employment.

Best practice in developing the employment prospects of refugees

The qualitative research for this study and literature included in the scoping review (for example, Gibb, 2018; Szkudlarek 2019; UNHCR, 2019) identifies that work with refugees should focus upon pre-employment preparation, job search (including when they should start and how they should look for work) and also sustaining and supporting progression for refugees through post-employment support. This should be matched by work with employers to improve their understanding of the issues refugees may face; to promote equality and diversity in employee recruitment, retention and progression and to improve the quality of work.

Many of the elements of effective practice in supporting refugees and employers are not unique to work with refugees; they feature in interventions to support other groups with complex barriers to employment, including those who are long-term unemployed or economically inactive; people from black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups and/or disabled people (Luchinskaya and Green, 2016; Weekes-Bernard, 2017; Bayer et al., 2020).

Although the elements of effective practice are reasonably well understood, the qualitative research for this study identifies that implementation can be challenging. The relatively small size of refugee populations means mainstream services and employers often struggle to develop the experience and expertise required to support refugees effectively and also reduces incentives for employers to target this group. The small size of refugee populations means that there is both a need for specialist support services like ReStart to support refugees and, conversely, a need to mainstream employer engagement into the wider work focused upon promoting equality and diversity in the Welsh workforce and increasing the quality of employment opportunities in Wales.

Although there is a case for specialist services, ReStart does not have the capacity to support all those refugees who may need or benefit from support to find and progress in employment. Moreover, ReStart does not have the expertise and resources in areas like self-employment or childcare that mainstream provision, such as Business Wales and Parents Childcare and

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Employment (PaCE), can offer. It is therefore important that refugees can access these services where appropriate. Although some advisors within Business Wales have experience in working with refugees, the qualitative research for this study and the Refugee Employment, Skills and Support Study (WG, 2020a) suggest that there is less experience and expertise in other national or regional employment support provision, such as Communities for Work (CfW). Although ReStart and voluntary sector organisations have the expertise needed to help build capacity within mainstream services, they are not resourced to do this as well as directly supporting refugees.

The qualitative research for this study also identifies that there is no “silver bullet” and, as table 1.1. illustrates, co-ordinated action is required across a range of services and partners. This raises questions about how action in this sector should be led and co-ordinated at local, regional and national levels. It also highlights how the time it can take for refugees to be 'work ready' for either entry or progression level opportunities demands great patience and perseverance on the part of refugees, and requires a long term commitment from support services like ReStart.

Table 1.1. Summary of key recommendations

Refugee engagement and support: preparing for employment	Responsibility
1. Active outreach working; for example, with faith and community leaders, groups and networks used to reaching out to groups of refugees who may otherwise be under-represented, including those 'stuck' in 'poor' work.	ReStart and also Jobcentre Plus (JCP) and national and regional employment support programmes like Working Wales, CfW, Journey2Work, Opus and Workways.
2. Work-focused assessments and action planning to determine what skills refugees need to realise their short term employment aspirations and to ensure that their short term goals and aspirations are aligned with	

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**Refugee engagement and support:
preparing for employment****Responsibility**

realistic employment opportunities.

3. Access to work placements or, where this is not possible, volunteering that enables refugees to acquire the workplace cultural competence and capital required and which also provides UK work experience.

4. Access to training which is directly relevant to employers' needs in the local labour market (for example food hygiene for those looking to work in food manufacturing).

5. Access to services such as the National Recognition Information Centre (NARIC) which can support the recognition of overseas qualifications (through, for example, the Restart project).

6. Practical support to enhance job search and applications and, where possible, actively matching refugees and suitable employment opportunities.

7. Review how effectively the actions and good practice identified in the current ESOL policy for Wales (WG, 2018d) in relation to access to formal ESOL provision (including in particular ESOL+ and ESOL for specific purposes, such as passing the driving test), and support to access other opportunities to develop language skills in informal and social settings, such as Friends and Neighbours (FAN) who run groups to develop conversational English), have been

The Welsh Government Post-16 Planning and Policy Team (which funds ESOL); Wales Strategic Migration Partnership (WSMP), ReStart and REACH+ and ESOL providers (e.g. FE colleges, Adult Learning Wales (ALW) and the voluntary sector), and employers.

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**Refugee engagement and support:
preparing for employment**

Responsibility

implemented.

**Sustaining employment and supporting
progression**

Responsibility

8. Keeping in touch with refugees and employers to provide post-employment support (including advice and support to assist refugees' integration into workplace cultures).

ReStart, Careers Wales, Trade Unions (including e.g. the Union Learning Fund); and Welsh Government employability and skills support, such as the **Flexible Skills Programme**; the Better Jobs, Better Futures project (in Swansea); FE and WBL providers.

9. Supporting progression in work (e.g. access to information, advice and guidance (IAG) about job opportunities and progression opportunities and routes linked to FE, WBL (such as apprenticeships) and higher education (HE), and access to support and training to build "career adaptability").

10. Using labour market intelligence (such as that outlined in this report) in order to identify entry level and progression employment opportunities and sectors/ employers on which to focus engagement activity to underpin IAG and ensure that refugees' aspirations are well aligned with employment opportunities.

ReStart regional employer engagement officers; Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and local authority (LA) employment engagement officers/teams; and the Welsh Government equalities team, linking with, for example, the Fair Work Commission, the Equality and Human Rights Commission in Wales and the voluntary sector (e.g. Bawso, Chwarae Teg and Tai Pawb) and County Voluntary Councils (CVCs), Public Service Boards

11. Work with employers to improve their understanding of refugees' circumstances

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**Refugee engagement and support:
preparing for employment**

Responsibility

and the challenges they may face.

(PSBs) and City Deals.

12. Work with employers to promote equality and diversity in workforce recruitment and selection processes, retention and progression (including pre- and post-employment support).

13. Improving the quality of work through, for example, national action to promote fair and ethical employment.

14. Exploring the scope for new initiatives, such as: match funding or employer provided ESOL and refugee employment development grants; developing equivalents to the [Wales Asylum Seekers and Refugee Doctors group \(WARD\)](#) for other groups of professionals; and/or developing initiatives to support ReStart and voluntary sector organisations to share and build confidence and expertise in mainstream employment support services, in supporting and working with refugees.

Welsh Government Equalities, Post-16 Planning and Policy and Skills and Employability teams and the voluntary sector (e.g. Displaced People in Action (DPIA), the Ethnic Youth Support Team (EYST) the Wales Refugee Council (WRC) and City of Sanctuary).

15. National and regional planning and co-ordination of action to enhance refugees' employment and progression opportunities.

The Welsh Government Equalities Team, WSMP, ReStart and the voluntary sector (for example, WRC, DPIA, City of Sanctuary).

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6. Contact details

Full Research Report: Holtom, D; Bowen, R; Pells, H; Lloyd-Jones, S; 2020. ReStart: Refugee Integration, Employer Engagement Opportunities. Cardiff: Welsh Government, GSR report number 75/2020.

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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