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# Refugee Employment and Skills Support Study

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## Summary

### 1. Introduction

1.1 Employment is seen as a vital part of integration for refugees. This study aims to understand the employment ambitions of refugee populations in Wales, to identify what it would take for refugees to achieve these ambitions, including the barriers to their achievement, and to identify how support for refugees could be developed to help them achieve these aims.

### 2. Research approach and methods

2.1 The study draws upon three key sources of data:

- a systematic literature review, to identify research evidence of, for example, refugees' aspirations and their experiences of un/employment and the barriers they face, and evaluative evidence of the effectiveness of different interventions aimed at supporting refugees to find work;
- interviews and discussions with stakeholders. 54 stakeholders from central, regional and local government, the voluntary sector, employment support services and employer bodies, colleges and universities were interviewed, and eight community researchers and 18 stakeholders<sup>1</sup> from central and local government, the voluntary sector, colleges and universities contributed to workshops; and
- a survey of 257 refugees<sup>2</sup> and 197 asylum seekers was undertaken by a team of community and People and Work researchers. The survey was done through a non-

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<sup>1</sup> This includes eight stakeholders who were also interviewed (i.e. who were included in the total of 54 stakeholders interviewed)

<sup>2</sup> In this study the term "refugee" is used to describe those with British citizenship, who had been granted "indefinite leave to remain", "discretionary leave to remain", "humanitarian protection", or any other type of leave to remain.

random sample and as such the research does not make any claims about its findings being representative of the broader refugee and asylum seeker populations.

2.2 The study's approach and methodology and further details on the sample achieved are described in section 2.

### **3. The ambitions of refugee and asylum seeker populations**

3.1 As the report outlines in section 3, most refugees and asylum seekers want to work and they want to find work that matches their interests, skills and experience. Around two thirds (63%) of those surveyed who had worked in their home country, wanted to continue in the same occupation or profession they had before seeking asylum. Ambitions typically reflected gendered roles in refugees' and asylum seekers' country of origin, although some women surveyed found freedom in the UK to consider new ambitions. The diversity of refugee populations (e.g. in terms of previous occupation) means their ambitions are equally diverse.

3.2 Refugees' and asylum seekers' ambitions are not fixed. Around 80% of those surveyed were willing to consider alternatives, and previous research has found that refugees' aspirations often fade over time, as their expectation of attaining or realising their initial ambitions diminishes.

### **4. The skills and qualifications of refugee and asylum seeker populations**

4.1 The diversity of refugee and asylum seeker populations means that their skills, including English language skills, and qualifications, are equally diverse; for example, some have a university education (27% of those surveyed) and strong English language skills, while others have no or little formal education (10% of those surveyed) and weak English language skills. There are also differences for different groups; for example, there is some evidence that levels of education tend to be lower amongst refugees resettled under the SVPRS.

4.2 Rates of participation in education and training are high for ESOL, but lower for other types of learning provision. Roughly two-thirds (65%) of those surveyed reported having taken part in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision. In contrast, rates of participation in other types of education and training in Wales, such as college (20%), university (10%), community provision (10%) or work experience/work placements, were much lower. The data collected for this study suggests that in part, this reflects the ways in which poor English language skills limit participation in other types of education and training. However, it also reflects other barriers, such as financial pressures and difficulties with transport and childcare. Low rates of participation in education and training are a concern, given many refugees' and asylum seekers' skill gaps, such as gaps in their "employability skills".

4.3 Future intentions to learn were somewhat different to patterns of current participation in learning, with around 40% reporting an intention to continue ESOL and almost a third expressing a desire to go to university (31%) or college (28%) once they had developed their language skills further.

Although future intentions to develop skills through college or university are higher than current rates of participation, views on the value and relevance of learning for employment were mixed. While almost two thirds of those surveyed (64%) called for more training provision, and 42% called for more work placements to help them find work, only around half of those surveyed identified the way in which learning could help them find work as a motivation for taking part in learning, now or in the future.

## **5. The employment experiences of refugees**

5.1 As section 5 outlines, 40% of those interviewed for this survey who were entitled to work, were in work. Other studies reviewed for this research have identified employment rates of between 20-50%, with most reporting rates of around 30-35%. A figure of around 35-40% appears a reasonable estimate, although it disguises differences in employment rates according to:

- gender as men have higher rates of employment than women;
- skill level as those with higher skills and in particular, English language skills, are more likely to be in work; and
- length of time in the UK, where those who have been in the UK longer are more likely to be in work.

5.2 Headline employment rates also conceal high rates of “poor work”, with many working below skill levels, for low pay in temporary or insecure jobs.

## **6. Barriers to employment**

6.1 Low levels of employment, and high rates of poor work amongst those in work, reflect the range of barriers that hinder or stop refugees from realising their aspirations (most asylum seekers cannot work legally).

6.2 For those with higher aspirations, a misalignment between their aspirations and skills and employer expectations, is a key barrier; for example, those aspiring to continue working in professional jobs typically face greater barriers to entry, such as higher expectations on the part of employers in relation to English language skills and “cultural competence” (the ability to understand, communicate with and effectively interact with employers and work colleagues in Wales). This means that refugees’ pathways to employment differ. For some, finding employment means adjusting their aspirations and accepting poorer work, where employers’ expectations are lower. For others it means deferring entry to employment while they develop their language and employability skills, including their cultural competence. The alignment of aspirations, skills and employer expectations could also be achieved by working with employers to change their expectations of employees.

6.3 However, even where refugees' aspirations are aligned with their skills and employer expectations, which may include them lowering their aspirations, as many of those surveyed were willing to do, a range of barriers hinder or stop refugees from realising their aspirations, which include:

- barriers linked to enforced migration, such as difficulties gaining recognition of qualifications, skills and experience gained overseas, reluctance amongst some employers to employ refugees, weak understanding of pathways to employment, poor mental health, and
- more generic barriers linked to people's circumstances, such as difficulties with transport and childcare, and the weaknesses of local labour markets, particularly in rural areas.

## **7. Support services**

7.1 As sections 7 and 8 illustrate, despite the commitment of staff, support services and ESOL provision struggle to help people overcome many of the barriers they face. Indeed, most of the refugees in work credited their success to their own efforts, rather than support from services. This reflects a number of factors including:

- the legal restrictions on asylum seekers working in the UK;
- inadequate ESOL provision in many parts of Wales and the difficulties inherent in learning a second language;
- the limited time and support that the Jobcentre Plus (JCP) can offer and the ways in which weak English language skills can limit the other support and opportunities asylum seekers and refugees can access; for example, they generally cannot access targeted employment support services such as Communities for Work (CfW)<sup>3</sup>, or work placements, until they have developed their language skills; and
- cuts in funding for support services.

## **8. The impact of unemployment and poor work**

8.1 As section 10 illustrates, unemployment and poor work contribute to high levels of poverty and social exclusion and much poorer levels of well-being amongst refugees and, in particular, asylum seekers, compared to the general population. When asked how happy they were yesterday on a scale of 0 -10, the mean scores for refugees and asylum seekers were 6.9, and 4.6 respectively, compared to the mean for the Welsh population which is 7.7.

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<sup>3</sup> Communities for Work (CfW) is a Welsh Government Programme supported by the European Social Fund (ESF), which offers employment support services in socio-economically disadvantaged areas (Communities First Clusters) to: young people aged 16-24 who are not in employment education or training and adults aged 25 and over who are either economically inactive or who have been out of work for over 12 months. Communities for Work Plus extends this support to improve employability skills to those not eligible for CfW or other ESF funded programmes, like PaCE (The Parents and Childcare Employment project).

## 9. Recommendations for improving support

9.1 As section 11 outlines, there is no “silver bullet” (or simple, single solution). An effective strategy should focus upon extending rights and aligning aspirations and skills with employer expectations, and addressing other barriers to work and progression in work. This requires co-ordinated action across a range of policy areas to strengthen:

- Integration, ESOL and training, to develop skills and ensure that refugees and asylum seekers are able to look for work;
- information advice and guidance and employment support to, for example, inform people’s aspirations and job search strategies; and
- employer engagement to, for example, change employers’ expectations and practice.

9.2 It will also require improvements in partnership working between services and monitoring and evaluation of policies and provision to support refugees and asylum seekers.

9.3 In response, section 11 outlines the study’s five overarching recommendations:

9.4 Recommendation 1: The Welsh Government should work to support integration from day one, as the Scottish Government has. This should help reduce the amount of ‘lost time’ during which skills and wellbeing are negatively affected, improve public understanding and perception of refugees and asylum seekers, and improve the wellbeing of asylum seekers and refugees. Action to support this should include the Welsh Government:

- Lobbying the UK government to reinstate asylum seekers’ rights to work<sup>4</sup>;
- Considering the case for developing short structured programmes to support integration, like those developed in other EU countries;
- maximising the use of existing resources to tackle language barriers. Business Wales’s use of its Participation Fund is a good example of this;
- working with partners to ensure that frontline staff have an awareness and understanding of the needs of refugees and asylum seekers as part of their workforce development;
- working with LAs and bodies such as the Arts Council for Wales and Sports Wales to explore opportunities for outreach and engagement with refugees and asylum seekers; and

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<sup>4</sup> Asylum policy is reserved to the UK Government, which controls the assessment of claims for asylum and also accommodation and financial support of asylum seekers.

- actively identifying opportunities to highlight the contribution of refugees and asylum seekers such as events to mark World Refugee Day and supporting local refugee sponsorship groups.

9.5 Recommendation 2: The Welsh Government should strengthen education and training provision for refugees and asylum seekers. This should support integration and help refugees find better work, faster. Action to support this should include the Welsh Government:

- increasing investment in ESOL provision and working with LAs, colleges, employers and ESOL providers to extend and mainstream the good practice identified in the current ESOL Policy Statement;
- working with colleges to explore opportunities for the provision of training in basic qualifications like food hygiene and health and safety in key world languages, like Arabic, for those with weaker English language skills; and
- working with colleges and Regional Skills Partnerships to explore the development of training pathways into growth sectors like social care for those with stronger English Language skills.

9.6 Recommendation 3: Welsh Government should strengthen support services for refugees and asylum seekers. There are a range of support services such as JCP, Careers Wales and a future employability programme. It is vital that these services are sensitive to the needs of refugees and that refugees are signposted to the support that is most relevant to their needs. Action to support this should include the Welsh Government:

- working with services to strengthen collaboration to, for example, enable information and expertise to be shared;
- working with the DWP to ensure its support 'offer' meets the needs of refugees. This should include ensuring the sensitive and intelligent use of claimant commitments; that full use is made of the skills and expertise of JCP staff, and supporting the development of expertise within JCP offices; and
- Ensuring that the needs of refugees are mainstreamed into the design and operations of the future employability programme and Communities for Work, and that where appropriate, refugees are treated as a priority group for services.

9.7 Recommendation 4: The Welsh Government should improve employer engagement with refugees. It is vital that employers understand refugees' rights to work, help support and encourage the employment of refugees and their progression in work. Action to support this should include the Welsh Government:

- working with the DWP to strengthen the role of JCP employment advisors;

- encouraging public bodies to support and promote employment and work placement opportunities for refugees; and
- ensuring that actions under the Employability Plan to underline the responsibility of employers to up-skill their workers, support their staff and provide fair work, include a focus upon refugees.

9.8 Recommendation 5: Improving data, evidence and governance. The current evidence base is weak, too little is known about the employment experiences of refugees and responsibility for action rests across multiple departments. Action to address this should include the Welsh Government:

- Ensuring that evaluations of key programmes consider support to refugees and, where applicable, asylum seekers;
- working with the DWP to explore opportunities to use JCPs labour market system to provide better data on experience of refugees;
- considering commissioning further research to explore progression of refugees in employment;
- providing regular updates to the Refugee and Asylum Seeker Operations Board; and
- exploring the feasibility of establishing an “experts by experience” steering group.

Report Authors:



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Available at: <https://gov.wales/refugees-employment-and-skills-support-study>

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

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Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

This document is also available in Welsh.