

Department for Work and Pensions Research Report 179

Refugees' Opportunities and Barriers in Employment and Training

By Alice Bloch

This report is based on a study of refugees and asylum seekers¹ from the Somali Regions, Iraq, Kosova, Sri Lanka and Turkey. The research used multiple approaches to data collection. Six focus groups with a range of organisations that provide advice, support and training to refugees and ethnic minority groups were carried out in September 2001. Consecutive data sets from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) (Spring, Summer and Autumn 2001) were combined for the purpose of secondary analysis to provide comparative data about participation in the labour market and training among ethnic minority people. A survey was carried out with 400 refugees and asylum seekers living in five regions in England: London, Yorkshire and Humberside, North West, North East and the Midlands. More specifically interviews were carried out in Birmingham, Manchester, London, Newcastle, Leeds and Sheffield. Survey interviews were carried out in community languages using translated questionnaires.

Research aim and objectives

The aim of the research was to determine whether the training and employment support for forced migrants who are eligible to work is sufficient and appropriate. Within the main aim there were six objectives. The objectives were:

1. To identify potential barriers to employment, training and education
2. To compare the employment needs and experiences in the labour market of forced migrants in relation to their ethnic minority counterparts with similar qualifications.
3. To assess whether and to what extent forced migrants are disadvantaged in the labour market compared to ethnic minorities generally.
4. To evaluate the current educational and employment provision for refugees and asylum seekers and to assess the ease or difficulty with which refugees and asylum seekers access appropriate support and guidance.
5. To assess the sources of disadvantage experienced by refugees and asylum seekers in the labour market and any interaction between the different factors.
6. To explore the use of services provided by statutory and ethnic minority and refugee specific voluntary organisations and the adequacy and appropriateness of the different provisions.

Main findings

Social and demographic characteristics of the sample and life in Britain

The survey sample of 400 refugees and asylum seekers comprised equal numbers of men and women, 80 interviews with respondents from each of the five communities,

¹ The term refugee will be used to describe all forced migrants (that is refugees, people with Exceptional Leave to Remain, people with Indefinite Leave to Remain, asylum seekers on temporary admission and naturalised British and EU citizens who came to Britain initially as forced migrants), unless a distinction is specified.

61 per cent of the sample had been in Britain for less than five years and 39 per cent had been in Britain for five years or more.

Nearly all refugees (96 per cent) had made new friends since living in Britain. Fifty-nine per cent had made friends mainly with members of their own community though 35 per cent had made friends with a mixture of people from refugee communities, other ethnic minority groups and 'white' British people.

Kinship and community networks were important in the lives of refugee people. Seventy per cent of respondents attended groups or meetings for refugees. Just under one-third (32 per cent) had moved to a different area since living in Britain of which 43 per cent had moved to London. Nearly one-third (31 per cent) of refugees gave their main reason for living in a particular locality as family, 16 per cent because of friends and 10 per cent because of the existence of a community.

Pre-migration characteristics

The majority of respondents were literate in either their first language or the language in which they were educated (i.e. Kurdish speakers from Turkey). Nearly everyone (96 per cent) had participated in formal education before coming to Britain. Fifty-six per cent of those who arrived in Britain aged 18 or over had a qualification on arrival of which 23 per cent had a degree or higher.

Before coming to Britain 42 per cent of respondents were working: 28 per cent were employees and 14 per cent were self-employed. Areas of employment were diverse though the jobs carried out most often were shop-keeping, teaching, office and clerical work, trades, farming and catering. In addition respondents had been engaged in a number of professional jobs including doctors, dentists, engineers and accountants.

English language and language learning

On arrival to Britain self-reported English language skills were generally poor. Seventeen per cent spoke English fluently or fairly well while the rest, 83 per cent, spoke English slightly or not at all. There was a large improvement in language skills. At the time of the survey, 21 per cent spoke English fluently, 39 spoke fairly well, and the rest, 40 per cent, spoke English either slightly or not at all.

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. However, not everyone with language needs had accessed a language course. Thirty-two per cent who spoke no English and 28 per cent who spoke English slightly on arrival to Britain had not attended a language course.

Thirty-one per cent of those who had studied in the past had not completed their course. Childcare and family commitments were mentioned most often as the reason for not completing (14 respondents), followed by getting a job (10 respondents) and health (eight respondents).

The numbers of contact hours each week and the length of courses varied. Of those studying at the time of the survey, 20 per cent were studying for less than five hours a week and 13 per cent were on courses that lasted less than three months. In terms of

improving courses, more hours a week was the main change mentioned most often (24 per cent) followed by more courses (12 per cent), teachers from own community (11 per cent) and different level classes (10 per cent).

Education and training

At the time of the survey 15 per cent of respondents were studying of which 22 per cent were studying for a degree. In addition to those studying at the time of the survey, a further 20 per cent had obtained a qualification in the past in Britain. Most often refugees had studied information technology. Other popular courses were English, business with finance or accountancy and health care or nursing.

Ten per cent of respondents had started a course at some time and not completed. Childcare or family commitments were the reasons mentioned most often for not completing (14 out of 39 respondents).

Participation in training was very low. At the time of the survey, four per cent of respondents were involved in training which is fewer than the 11 per cent of LFS respondents from ethnic minority communities who were involved in training. In addition to the four per cent who were involved in training at the time of the survey, a further eight per cent had trained in Britain in the past.

Refugees were interested in training: 60 per cent said that they wanted to participate in training. The training wanted most often was in information technology (28 per cent), languages (16 per cent) and dress making/sewing (11 per cent). The reasons given most often for not doing training, among those who wanted training but were not doing it, was not having the language skills or wanting to learn English first (28 per cent), not knowing what was available (18 per cent), lack of childcare (14 per cent), not knowing what they were entitled to (six per cent) and family commitments (four per cent). There was a demand for training but a lack of the necessary English language proficiency, a lack of childcare and lack of information about entitlement were limiting take-up.

Employment

There was a low level of labour market participation. Only 29 per cent of refugees were working at the time of the survey compared with 60 per cent of ethnic minority people according to the LFS. Those who were working were employed mostly in a few industries or types of jobs: catering, interpreting and translation, shop work and in administration and clerical jobs. Diversity of employment was much more limited than the work carried out before coming to Britain and there was a notable lack of involvement in professional jobs despite pre-migration experience. English language proficiency was the factor that most determined both labour market participation and the type of employment people had. Those without language skills were less likely to be working and those who were working were concentrated in low skill jobs such as catering, cleaning and factory work.

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).

Refugees were also less well paid than their ethnic minority counterparts. The average hourly rate of pay for refugees was £7.29 an hour compared to £9.26 an hour earned by ethnic minorities. Thus refugees' hourly earnings were on average only 79 per cent of those of other ethnic minority people. Eleven per cent of refugee respondents were earning less than the National Minimum Wage.

Methods of job seeking in Britain varied from those used in the country of origin. Kinship networks were the most important way through which people had found employment before coming to Britain (33 per cent). In Britain only seven per cent had found their job through a family member. Instead, more people found their job through friends than any other route (32 per cent) and unlike in the country of origin, private agencies (seven per cent), a community group (five per cent) and someone already employed in the workplace (five per cent) provided opportunities for employment in Britain.

Among those not working at the time of the survey 37 per cent were looking for work. The work being sought was generally clustered and mentioned most often was shop work (19 per cent), 'anything' (15 per cent) and factory work or dressmaking (13 per cent). The work people were looking for was not always commensurate with skills and qualifications. For instance, people with degrees were looking for administration jobs with those with 'A' levels or their equivalents were looking for work in shops. The main reasons for not looking for work were family/childcare commitments (40 per cent), health problems (21 per cent) and due to studying, including studying English (21 per cent).

Those who were not working at the time of the survey but looking for work had low levels of knowledge about statutory provision. Just under half (49 per cent) had heard of any schemes run by JobCentre Plus. Although people had not heard of statutory schemes, 54 per cent of those who were looking for a job or a different job had used the Job Centre. However, the largest proportion of refugees had asked friends and relatives about work (70 per cent). In contrast, ethnic minority people were more likely than refugees to use more formal routes such as studying the situation vacant listings in papers and journals (78 per cent), answering advertisements (53 per cent) and applying directly to employers (45 per cent).

Refugees were asked what help or advice would be most useful to find the type of job wanted and mentioned most often – by 31 per cent - was English language training. In terms of barriers to employment, it is not therefore surprising that English language and literacy was mentioned most often (30 per cent). Lack of UK work experience was mentioned by 19 per cent of refugees.

Voluntary work

Twenty-nine per cent had been involved in voluntary work in Britain. Those who were more proficient in English were more likely to be involved in voluntary work than were others. More than half of those who spoke English fluently had been involved in voluntary work compared with 30 per cent of those who spoke English

fairly well, 14 per cent who spoke slightly and 11 per cent who spoke no English. The voluntary work carried out most often was interpretation and translation work followed by advice and advocacy.

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