

Social Justice Research Programme

Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Scotland: A Skills and Aspirations Audit

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This study was developed and conducted by the Scottish Executive in partnership with the Scottish Refugee Council (SRC). The aim of the project was to audit the skills and aspirations of refugees and asylum seekers living in Scotland. The study was conducted in parallel with a study commissioned by the Home Office to audit refugee skills across the UK.

Main Findings

- Refugees and asylum seekers living in Scotland are, for the most part, well qualified. More than 75% of respondents said they had completed secondary school education (or an equivalent), over half said they had completed college education (or an equivalent) and approximately 21% of respondents said they had completed a course at a university.
- Demonstrating their qualifications was an issue for refugees and asylum seekers as only 21% of respondents who had completed secondary school education (or an equivalent), approximately 28% of those who had completed college level of education (or an equivalent) and 11% of those who had completed some kind of university education actually had their certification with them.
- Respondents said they had a broad range of skills in trades and professions and were keen to utilise them. Nine per cent of respondents said they had previously worked in the trade or technical industries. Approximately 7% said they had been teachers in their country of origin.
- Of those respondents with refugee status, Exceptional Leave to Remain or Indefinite Leave to Remain (147), under 7% were either in paid employment or self-employed.
- Those refugees and asylum seekers in paid employment were mainly working in the service industries, in jobs that were not commensurate with their experience and skills.
- Motivation to work was high. A large number of respondents, particularly asylum seekers, expressed frustration at being unable to work. While the priority was to gain paid employment, respondents also expressed aspirations to volunteer and to gain work experience, in addition to improving their English language skills and accessing further education and training.
- The majority of respondents (88%) said they would like to stay in Scotland.
- Lack of English language skills and training opportunities were identified as key barriers for refugees and asylum seekers (with permission to work) to gaining employment in the UK in addition to (for recent asylum seekers) not having the legal right to work.

Introduction

The background to this work is varied. It includes the commitment of the Scottish Executive to welcome and promote diversity in Scottish culture and society. It also includes the implications of current demographic trends (a falling and ageing population and a continuing out-migration of younger people and skilled people). In this context, the Scottish Executive has highlighted a need to encourage more people to choose to live and work in Scotland and recognises that refugees (and potentially asylum seekers) have much to contribute to Scotland's economic and social development.

Research Aims

The overall aim of the research was to audit the skills, qualifications and aspirations that refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland have. The research aimed to explore the educational experiences and qualifications of refugees and asylum seekers; their work experience both in their countries of origin and here in the UK; their language skills; and their needs and aspirations for the future.

The project explored the following questions:

1. What kinds of skills and qualifications do refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland have?

- The findings indicate that refugees and asylum seekers living in Scotland are, for the most part, well qualified and possess a broad range of technical and professional skills.
- The skills and experience respondents had gained and developed before coming to the UK were varied. They included highly specialised skills in areas of medicine (for example, surgical skills and skills in midwifery, obstetrics and gynaecology), law and engineering.
- Respondents also had management experience, trades skills (such as carpentry and building) and IT experience.
- The Audit identified 90 languages spoken with varying degrees of proficiency by respondents.
- Sixteen per cent of respondents indicated that they could speak English "fluently" and a further third indicated that they could speak English "fairly well".
- Just over 95% of respondents indicated that they had experienced some kind of formal education.
- Over 55% of respondents indicated that they had completed a college education (or an equivalent) where they had studied subjects such as languages, business, mathematics, and IT.

- Approximately 21% of respondents indicated that they had completed university level education where they had studied subjects such as Business, Medicine, Social Sciences, Education and Law.

2. What aspirations do refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland hold?

- The vast majority of respondents (88%) said they would like to stay in Scotland.
- The majority of respondents (72%) indicated a desire to improve their English language and literacy skills, and to access further training (just over 66%).
- Many respondents disliked being reliant on state benefits and expressed a desire to provide for themselves and to positively contribute to Scottish society.
- Over a third of respondents said that they would like to find any kind of work and approximately 58% said they would like to find work that matched their skills and experience.
- For asylum seekers, the priority was to receive a positive decision on their asylum claim.
- Significant numbers of respondents also said they would like to volunteer (34%) and/or do work experience placements (46%).

3. What kinds of barriers and difficulties do refugees and asylum seekers face when attempting to access further education and training?

- Lack of proficiency in English language and literacy was perceived by refugees and asylum seekers as a key barrier to obtaining employment in the UK.
- The majority of refugees and asylum seekers who participated in the Audit (72%) had been able to access English language training.
- Lack of full refugee status was also raised as a barrier to accessing mainstream training courses.
- Childcare issues may have been a further barrier, particularly for single parents.

4. What kinds of barriers and difficulties do refugees and asylum seekers (with the right to work) face when attempting to find employment?

- Ten of the 147 refugee respondents and 20 of the 218 asylum seeker respondents who *potentially* had

permission to work¹ were either self-employed or in paid employment in Scotland.

- Those who were employed were in posts not commensurate with their skills.
- The key barriers to finding employment were identified as a lack of eligibility, a lack of proficiency in English language, difficulties in accessing training, proving qualifications and accessing appropriate conversion courses.
- The majority of respondents (31%) said they were not working because they did not have a work permit.
- Just under 25% of respondents felt improved skills in English language and/or literacy would significantly improve their employment prospects or help them access their preferred employment.
- Only 21% of respondents who had completed secondary school education, approximately 28% of those who had completed college (or an equivalent) level of education and 11% of those who had completed university actually had their certification with them in Scotland.
- Thirty-six per cent of respondents felt that training, including university study would significantly improve their employment prospects or help them access their preferred employment.
- Over 7% indicated specific training needs in order to gain locally recognised certificates in various areas including engineering, plumbing and computer training.
- Fifty-one respondents (almost 10%) felt they needed more information about jobs.

5. How can we best use the information about refugees' and asylum seekers' skills, qualifications and aspirations to help counter the negative perceptions that many people hold?

1 All those who indicated that they had claimed asylum before the end of 2001 (218) should have been *eligible to apply* for permission to work after 6 months residency in the UK, under the legal concession that was ended on 23rd July 2002.

- The public discourse that circulates about refugees and asylum seekers rarely focuses on their skills, qualifications, aspirations and what they can (or would like to) contribute to the region or country in which they have sought refuge.
- This Audit indicates that many asylum seekers are very keen to put their skills to good use in Scotland and are frustrated by their inability to do so.
- The findings challenge a number of negative popular misconceptions of asylum seekers and refugees including that they are poorly qualified, that they are economic migrants taking jobs away from local people or that refugees and asylum seekers only come to the UK because of the housing and benefit system.
- The information contained in the Audit can usefully inform Key Actions (15-20) in the Scottish Refugee Integration Forum Action Plan, relevant to 'Positive Images, Community Development and the Media'. Additionally, the responses suggest that the implementation of Key Actions (51-57) relevant to 'Enterprise, Lifelong Learning, Employment and Training' will impact positively on the opportunities and experiences of refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland.

Implications

The findings suggest that refugees and asylum seekers have a wealth of skills and qualifications and high levels of motivation. However, a very small percentage of refugees and asylum seekers who participated in the Audit (and *may* have been eligible to work) had been able to access paid employment in Scotland. Given that large numbers of respondents had been waiting some time for a decision on their asylum claim, there may be a risk that refugees' and asylum seekers' motivations may lessen over time, their skills may become outdated and that they could become increasingly isolated and less easily integrated into the labour market.

The key agencies that may need to take note of this work include DWP (Jobcentre Plus, New Deal) Scottish Enterprise, Careers Scotland, local authorities, Scottish universities, colleges of further education, the Scottish Executive's Lifelong Learning Department and the Fresh Talent Project, Chambers of Commerce, employer organisations, trade unions and the Scottish Refugee Council.

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