

Education Briefing

Scottish Refugee Council Integration Study – Education Briefing

Introduction

This briefing is one of five looking at domains of integration in Scottish Refugee Council's longitudinal refugee integration study. These findings are based on some of the data from Stage 1 (Winter 2010/2011) and Stage 2 (Spring/Summer 2011) of the study so combine 262 questionnaire responses and 30 semi-structured interviews. What follows is some of the main findings of interest within the realms of education. More detail can be found in the full reports on http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/policy_and_research/research_reports

Desire for education

Despite the feeling among some of our respondents that taking part in any further education would simply delay the possibility of employment, there were a larger number of respondents who indicated a real hunger for further education, but also suggested that the options beyond English language classes were somewhat limited. One stated that "Well, I'm somebody who likes studying and I also like working with public, you see. So I tried, with my situation, I tried to find out courses in education I could do, but I couldn't find any, and so the only thing I've managed to get into was health" (E750). There were a number of reasons mentioned for these difficulties.

Educational access - finances

Access to education was for some seen as a fall back in the case of struggles to access the labour market. However, the reality of studying brought with it numerous problems. Some respondents talked of being accepted onto educational courses, and some of starting those courses but giving them up for financial reasons. "But this is a wee bit hard to study, and you don't get a job. It's very hard..... Personally for me just with the finance, the finance situation, because you get the bursary and you have to pay everything. You don't get nothing for survive, so I decided now just to finish this year the NQ, then after I go and find a job, work for some time, and then I come back to finish my studies" (E38). He was, however, aware that the difficulties in financing an educational course could remain.

Educational access – childcare

Another important issue that prevents people from accessing educational courses, in many cases courses they had already been given a place on, was the issue of childcare. One woman talked of having been given admission to a course, and had even managed to get a part time place for childcare reasons, meaning she would have to attend between 6pm and 9pm. However, as a lone parent with no family in the city she was unable to take up this course (E58). Thus in some cases familial support and educational possibilities operate in tandem

Educational progression

For many of those who did manage to get onto educational courses, there was a feeling that accessing any course would have a knock on effect of leading to further and more advanced educational courses. One man talked of getting on an Open University course after having done an Esol class (English for speakers of other languages). Such language courses were seen as the precursor to other educational possibilities. One woman who had ambitions to study international health issues was attempting to access that by first doing an HNC (E140). Another respondent talked of Esol classes opening up an HNC and subsequently an Open University course (E137), which he was currently undertaking.

Proof of educational level

The need for certificates of education was also highlighted by many interviewees and indicated a desire for official recognition of educational qualifications for many people having difficulties getting existing qualifications recognised. One woman talked of the dual role of official recognition and a subsequent positive impact on mental health. “And, you see, when I arrived I was too much traumatised and I couldn’t concentrate, I did the mechanical course because my father was a mechanic and this is what I knew I’d understand.....for the last few years I couldn’t concentrate on education. Now I’m feeling a little bit better, my brain has been a little better because I’ve got to...lots of changes have happened in my life and they have made me more...a little bit more energetic, hopeful, all these things, and confident” (E279). The relationship between educational access and mental health was seen as a symbiotic one whereby access to education improved mental health and improved mental health opened up access to education.

Language development - communication

Language development was seen as having numerous positive impacts from general communication to accessing services. One respondent stated that communication issues were absolutely crucial to the development of relationships. “If you can’t speak English, you can’t communicate with a lot of people, only when you meet someone from your country, yeah. It’s really difficult to integrate even if you meet someone, like I’m African, if I meet some other African who can’t speak English, it’s really difficult to be friends” (E750). Another added that “it’s made me very relaxed because a long time ago when we came you had to find an interpreter or somebody to help you, but day by day we are building our confidence and we are trying to do it better and better and better, but it’s working very well now” (E752). This day-to-day impact rather than more structural service access was seen as the predominant benefit of language development among our interviewees. “It helps us if we go shopping, and to shops, and just everyday life. And also in my voluntary job, I speak to people every day who are from here. Yes, and it’s thanks to these lessons because when I arrived here I didn’t understand a word. When I arrived here, I was lost” (E137).

Language development – social contact

Social contact is clearly positively impacted by language proficiency, and this is seen as positively impacting upon mental health. “Speaking English is quite useful in your life. You are able to communicate with people. Sometimes they are not able to do anything for you but at least you can tell them your problem and you know you will be - you feel you have less stress and you can speak to other people. When you are not able to say your problem you will be depressed” (E681).

Some respondents even went as far as to say that help in language development allowed people to live fuller lives. “I could live like a human because when you can’t communicate with people in the society, you are not living like a human, you know, and, yes, of course I did, I really, really appreciate that because nobody will support you that way in my country” (E541).

Learning English also reduced fear and embarrassment. “I think firstly I was scared to speak with

people and when I saw someone I changed my way...maybe they want to speak with me and I can't answer and it was very embarrassing for me" (E529).

Accessing language classes

However, accessing language classes was not always easy. Knowledge of classes was achieved through a variety of means. While some people heard about them from agencies such as Scottish Refugee Council and the Red Cross, others found out through more informal networks.

While language was seen as important, there were significant difficulties in accessing language courses. One interviewee talked of having been on a waiting list for two years (E657). Others talked of trying to teach themselves while waiting for access to training (Far 27). There is a significant desire to learn English that lack of classes therefore does not end in all cases. One man talked of taking a dictionary everywhere with him and writing down things he didn't understand to discuss with his Scottish girlfriend (E430).

One woman here as a result of family reunion had been unable to access English language classes due to the type of visa she was now on. She was told she would have to pay for it, which she was unable to do due for financial reasons (A14).

Next Steps

In the Spring of 2012 a number of interviews will be conducted on educational matters. This will add to the existing data about education and together will provide a more meaningful understanding of education and refugee integration in Scotland.

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Scottish Refugee Council is an independent charity which provides advice and information to people seeking asylum and refugees living in Scotland. We also campaign for fair treatment of refugees and people seeking asylum and to raise awareness of refugee issues.

This research project runs for two years and will provide better information and understanding of the lives of refugees and people seeking asylum in Scotland. The project uses mixed methods and is supported by an Advisory Group of academics, the voluntary sector and statutory authorities. The work is funded by the Big Lottery Fund.