

Employment Briefing

Scottish Refugee Council Integration Study – Employment 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 realm of employment. More detail can be found in the full reports on http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/policy_and_research/research_reports

Employment levels

Employment level among refugees in Scotland is extremely low. Just under 21% of refugees are in any form of paid employment. Women are slightly less likely than men to be working, although the small number of research participants working makes this finding less than conclusive. These low employment levels are not as a result of the economic downturn. Questions about previous employment among those in the country for considerable lengths of time show similarly low levels of employment. These findings result despite a hunger on the part of refugees to work and contribute, and despite often very highly skilled employment histories in their countries of origin.

Employment types

For the small number of people working they are concentrated in low paid precarious forms of employment. Most were working in fixed term employment or were employed via agencies. Indeed there is some evidence of people being employed on zero-hours contracts. When compared to work in their countries of origin there is evidence of severe underemployment. One man talked of his attempts to get work and the problems encountered. "Sometimes you work five hours a month, or you work ten hours, I didn't work from September to March. I didn't work any hours. So you just wait, they phone you for five hours, ten hours or something like that.....if you say all the hours you worked since you registered maybe less than 20 hours, that's from October, October til now. It's not enough" (E38).

Wages

Wage levels for those in work are low. None of our respondents working full-time were paid over £15,000 each year and some appear to be getting paid lower than minimum wage levels.

Employment, skills and aspirations

While almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of respondents hoped to start employment in the coming two years, under a third thought this aspiration would be realised. Many refugees have given up on the chance of using their previous skills and instead are aiming for employment within a fairly narrow set of

occupations. Giving up on using existing skills was partly determined by assumptions about available employment. "What I am saying is we have to look for jobs where there are jobs available" (E137).

Accessing employment

Employment and an inability to access employment extended beyond the period in which people are not allowed to work. This was seen as elongating the period in which skills and qualifications were being wasted. "I'm 35 and I'm sitting....I've got qualifications, I've got...I'm a healthy person, I can do anything, and that's being wasted" (E750). Another interviewee talked of the time period between previous and future employment. "I've got a gap between my previous experience and now" (E33). The lack of work history here also contributed to these difficulties. For example, a number of respondents commented on the demand among employment agencies for a work history in the UK prior to being prepared to take them on, a history lacking among most refugees.

What people did in relation to their search for work was discussed by a number of interviewees. "Before I was applying in many, many. This is what disappointed me really, because I can't find any job. I applied in many places, even kitchen porter, even cleaning. I can't find it. its not easy" (E38). Another stated that "20 applications a day, never get an interview. Never got any interview....why? I don't know exactly. Maybe I'm not very old in this country. I don't know exactly. Or maybe I don't have experience in the kitchen porter and leaning stuff, because they ask about experience" (E38).

Employment discrimination

The struggle to find work had a number of dimensions, one of which was discrimination. There were some feelings of having been discriminated against or marginalised in the labour market. One man felt his age and his origin left him in a difficult situation with regard to finding a job. "I am a 49 year old man, 49 year old foreign man whose first language is not English, they can be really hesitant to hire people like me, you know what I'm saying....if you were an employer, would you hire an old man like me rather than a young Scottish native people?" (E541).

Others felt more direct discrimination was occurring. One told a story of 'British' people getting preferential treatment, making finding work at a time of high unemployment even more difficult. "You look into the things, a job comes out and you apply. Sometimes you don't get an answer. Sometimes when you get an answer, they tell you that oh the man responsible is no longer here, but the advert continues in the machine, you see. Sometimes when you go for an interview, you come thinking that you have done well, only to hear that you have not been successful. And by my personal findings, it would appear there are more Britons unemployed for particular jobs, and you cannot get that job, where there's a Briton looking for the same job and is unemployed. I think that is what I've seen" (E382).

There were also stories of exploitation in the workplace. One said "I've worked for some companies that were not too kind, some companies that thought that because you are a refugee you don't know your rights, that they could manipulate you, intimidate you to pay you lowly" (E140). This respondent also alluded to threats that should you resign from an exploitative job you would not be able to get benefits or housing support. S/he went on to tell a story of finding a job via Job Centre Plus that ended up paying below minimum wages. S/he subsequently resigned and reported this to Job Centre Plus who effectively argued that it was none of their business.

Employment and integration

Employment was identified as a key component of successful integration, and subsequently lack of employment was a barrier to integration. However, there was also a link between language development and employment. One man spoke of delaying looking for work until his language skills were more fully developed (Far 27). This highlights the need for language support early in

order that this barrier can be overcome quickly so that people can then develop at relative pace.

Employment was seen as having the capacity to reduce social isolation among refugees. One stated that “when you are allowed to work then you’ll be able to move, meet people, have friends, you know. At times you will be happy, you find that you have someone to turn to, someone to talk to” (E58). However, the knock on effect of this was that the lack of employment led to shame and made friendships difficult to make and sustain. Another interviewee talked about the feelings of rejection resulting from not working. “It makes you – I don’t know how to say that – is it rejected?...Just useless yeah. As the time passes, you just get used to being unemployed”, but that “if you know the benefits of the work, you try hard to get back to work because it makes your life.... Valuable, it makes your life more valuable” (E536).

Right to work

There appears to be a link between asylum seekers not having the right to work and these low employment levels. The implications of not working during the asylum process were mentioned by many interviewees, even those who had a relatively quick decision. Many made allusions to this period being one in which life stopped. “It’s hard when you’re used to working and you go somewhere where you can’t use your skills, you’re just....its like your life has stopped. That’s how it is at the moment” (E750). This was seen as preventing the ability to think about the future and make any plans. This situation was likened to being put in ‘cold storage’, often during a period in which people are usually building their careers. “We are not allowed to work, this is the bad thing for us....for they give me status after eight years, its means during these eight years it means like you did nothing and you lost you’re age also.....for a lot of people when you were in your thirties is the time when you’re starting to build your career, so for you, you weren’t allowed to start a career” (E752). Another added that “its not easy to just sit and wait and do nothing. Although even now its very difficult because its not easy to find a job at this time as well” (E751).

Not only was career development put on hold, there was also the risk of existing skill sets becoming redundant. “You can lose your skills if, you know, eight years, nine years, you can’t, what can I say? To improve to exercise your skill, but its not good. It’s very bad because you can’t use it” (E460). The enforced idleness with regard to work was also seen as having a negative impact on children and many parents struggle with the reality of not being the role models that they hoped themselves to be. “You want to be like an example for your own children. Sometimes its really hard for them because when we were back home, we were working for them and now here, we just sit around with them. They really don’t know what’s happening and we are just like nothing” (E750).

Next steps

In the Spring of 2012 a number of interviews will be conducted on employment matters. This will add to the existing data about employment and together will provide a more meaningful understanding of its relationship to 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.