

Improving Employment Options for Refugees with a Higher Academic Background

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Background to Bristol and West of England economy and labour market

Bristol is the 8th largest city in England and the 10th largest local authority. The population of Bristol is estimated to be 449,300 with Bristol being the largest city in the South West. The proportion of the population who are not 'white British' has increased from 12% to 22% of the total population. The proportion of people living in Bristol who were not born in the UK has increased from 8% to 15% of the total population. Bristol is a vibrant and diverse city with 45 religions, at least 187 countries of birth represented and at least 91 main languages spoken.

The wider West of England sub region current share of national economic growth (GVA) is the highest of any core city region in the UK at 3.1%. The economy is worth more than £25b per year and contributes some £10b to the Treasury. Oxford Economics base line growth projects 65,000 jobs and 2.6% GVA growth to 2030 in the West of England, reflecting the fact that this is one of the most successful sub regions in the UK. It has a highly skilled workforce and high levels of employment. With 38.6% of the working age population educated to NVQ level 4 or higher and has the 3rd highest percentage of employees in the knowledge economy (excluding London), with 24% of employees compared to 19% for England. 48% of West of England workplace employees are managers, directors and senior officials; in professional occupations; or associate professional & technical occupations, compared to 44% nationally. Growth sectors have been identified as key to the future of the economy. These include low carbon industries, digital and media, high tech industries, advance engineering and aerospace and professional services which require a highly skilled workforce. There is evidence of skill shortages in the region. At the start of 2013, the REC / KPMG report on jobs showed 14 areas of skill shortage and by the 2014 this had risen to 47 and is accelerating (www.businesswest.co.uk/2014/02/13/uk-skill-shortages-expected-for-2014) and a recent survey has revealed that more than one in three small and medium sized manufacturers in the wider South West of England region are held back by skill shortages (www.djsresearch.co.uk) and 45% of South West businesses surveyed are already experiencing skills gaps within their organisations and more than half (56 per cent) have been unable to fill vacancies over the past year as a result. (Princes trust 2014) . Despite the area's increasing prosperity in recent years the West of England still has a significant number of localities and groups experiencing high levels of deprivation. There are 28 wards (local communities) with significantly above average workless people. Well documented barriers to employment remain education, lack of employability, Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) (West of England LEP).

The working population in Bristol has increased by 28,700 people (10%) since 2005. The greatest increase was for 20-34 year old which increased by 17%. This age group alone has accounted for more than two thirds (68%) of the total increase in the working population age in Bristol. Many of these people are likely to be migrants, including students. The

Somali population is estimated to be 8,300 people, local knowledge suggests that Somalis, in particular men living in informal accommodation, may be underestimated and likely to be around 10,000. The main language spoken in Bristol is English followed by Polish and Somali, overall 9% of people do not speak English as their main language. 1.5% of people in Bristol cannot speak English.

Education, Skills and Training, is where Bristol experiences some of the highest levels of deprivation and is particularly concentrated in the Social Housing areas in South Bristol. 16% of Bristol residents, 69,000 people live in the most deprived areas in England, including 17,800 children and 10,500 older people. 72,000 people suffer from income deprivation.

Between April 2015 and March 2016, unemployment rates for Bristol remains the highest of all the British core cities for all but Cardiff, Sheffield and Leeds. As of January 2016 there were 5,335 male and 1,740 female JSA/Universal Credit claimants resident in Bristol. Further real unemployment is likely to be significantly higher with unemployment rates in Bristol sitting around 7%, which equates to about 21,000 unemployed.

Bristol is one of the strongest performing major English cities outside London with 233,800 people employed, 78,300 on a part-time contract and 34,400 operating on a self-employed basis. Bristol offers a diverse range of businesses across many sectors:

Professional Services (Financial, Insurance and Legal) *

Advanced Engineering and Aerospace*

Hi Tech*

Creative and Digital Industries*

Low Carbon

Construction and Development

Distribution and Logistics

Retail

Tourism

Health, Social Care and Life Sciences

Education

*Those marked with a * are considered to be the priority sectors for the West of England LEP*

Employment by occupation covers the following job titles:

Job Title	Number of people
Managers, Directors and Senior Officials	19,700
Professional Occupations	64,800
Associate Professional & Technical	42,500
Administrative & Secretarial	21,700
Skilled Trades Occupations	21,000
Caring, Leisure & other Service Occupations	17,400
Sales and Customer Service	15,400
Process Plant & Machine Operatives	11,100
Elementary Occupations	19,100

Background to refugee crisis

There are 60 million people throughout the world that have had to flee their homes. This has created more than 15 million refugees worldwide. There are an estimated 117,234 refugees living in the UK.

The UK received 37,878 asylum applications in 2015 for which, just 45% were granted asylum.

More than half of the world's refugees (60%) came from just five countries:

Syria	4.2 million
Afghanistan	2.6 million
Somalia	1.1 million
Sudan	744,000
South Sudan	641,000

The political and policy profile of the recent refugee crisis has been raised by conflicts in countries such as Somalia and Afghanistan and especially in Syria over the past few years. The huge influx across the Mediterranean from Turkey to Greece and from Libya to Italy and the huge movements of people across Europe has increased the challenge. The movement of significant groups trying to reach the UK (as evidenced by the camps at Calais etc) is a further important element. Brexit does not have immediate or direct implications for the status of refugees in the UK but has indirect consequences for policy, funding and the wider environment.

Whilst the major drivers behind resettlement and integration have been humanitarian, human rights and access to basic services such as housing, health care etc, the importance of targeted action to offer economic opportunity has been increasingly recognized in other EU member states such as Netherlands and Sweden and further afield in Canada for example.

Bristol and the West of England now has a significant population of refugees and although the exact numbers are not known, this could be up to 2000 or more people of working age. In addition to those initially resettled here, evidence and experience suggests that many move to this area from elsewhere in the UK once their refugee status is confirmed because of the perceived greater employment opportunities.

The role and experience of Ashley Community Housing

As a business Ashley Community Housing works with refugees and asylum seekers. Ashley Community Housing (**ACH**) is a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee, established in Bristol in 2008. We are a registered Provider of Social Housing (Housing Association) specialising in refugees and newly arrived communities. All our tenants are refugees, have official status and are eligible for housing and other benefits, and to find work.

We manage approximately 400 units of shared accommodation in Bristol, Birmingham and Wolverhampton, resettling over 600 people per year and reuniting over 40 families. Our training subsidiary, delivering training for community learners, operates in the West of England and the Black Country.

In 5 years we have grown from 3 FTE staff to our current 50, growing to 57 over the next 6 months. In the same time we have increased turnover from £360k to £2.25M.

Typically our beneficiaries are able to progress into sustained independent living after 170 – 270 days of program support. We are special because we know our beneficiaries very well and understand what they need to thrive. We have the ‘lived experience’. Put simply:-

- We build bridges into mainstream UK life for refugees who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. We tailor a unique programme in language, culture, employability, economic wellbeing and tenancy sustainment to further re-settle our beneficiaries.
- We deliver accredited and non-accredited training provision, including employability, careers advice and guidance
- We use constructive disruption as a tool to change perceptions of refugees to be seen as valuable societal assets #rethinkingrefugee
- We have the “lived experience” to change their lives positively.

Challenge

Training and employment support is vital and we offer a range of options in the context of the resources we have available. This includes a job club, IT, work search advice, specific skills training relating to selected work areas and language training through ESOL.

A focus group session¹ indicated that for many refugees, more customised language training was felt to be a priority along with support to enable them to become more familiar with UK recruitment and selection processes and with work culture. Many had aspirations to access higher education, set up small businesses or re commence academic or professional studies. Those who had been in the UK for longer had often experienced a cycle of low level, entry level employment, followed by unemployment and further generic training.

The field of English for Speakers of Other Languages is a huge challenge. There is a clear divide with refugees entering the UK between their academic ability versus their ability to speak the English language. Although data is not readily available, there are a large percentage of refugees entering the UK with higher level qualifications and previous employment in prominent positions in the employment market. ESOL (English as a second or other language) tend to push agendas of employability and integration, claiming refugees and immigrants are a drain on the economy or – contradicting that – taking local jobs. Many refugees get caught continuing cycle of ESOL skills courses and move from one training provider to another before living on benefits or securing employment in the lower paid, manual labouring sector. Refugees bring a wealth of skills, knowledge and talent to make a

substantial and positive contribution to the economic, social and cultural life of the country. The NHS relies heavily on foreign labour with 23% of doctors and 47% of nurses working within the NHS born outside of the UK. Financial assistance is dwindling and the training and support offered now is not having a positive impact on integrating refugees into society.

There is a missed opportunity available to work with those refugees that are academically qualified but face barriers to higher level employment due to their understanding of the English language and operating structure of British businesses. It has been discussed by many writers on the challenges of teaching record that it is virtually impossible even with the best teachers, to satisfy all learners 'diverse' needs in mixed classes. The majority of ESOL delivery is still generic with ad hoc levels of differentiating taking place to meet the different interests, styles and employment needs to the individual. There are some providers delivering English for Work but this is still classroom delivery and not tailored to the individual.

We recognise the key importance of access to decent employment and economic opportunity as central to resettlement and integration. This is not only in the interests of the individuals concerned but will lead to reduced dependence on benefits and contribute to the wider success of the economy. It is also important, in our view, to establish a pathway towards non entry level employment for refugees where possible and appropriate, not only to make best use of their skills but also to reduce conflict with other groups in the community who need access to entry level jobs.

There is little doubt that developing English language and employment skills is however of vital importance to refugees. It is also evidenced that securing and progressing in employment is one of the most important factors in successful settlement. This provides economic independence, raises self-esteem and integrates, not only the individual but the whole family into the community and society. With the levels of unemployment and the skills shortage in some sectors, refugees can make a powerful contribution to addressing this hole in the labour market. Refugees who are fluent in the English Language are 20% more likely to be in employment and earn approximately 20% more than those with underdeveloped language skills. Dr Jane Ward, Regional Development Officer at NIACE address the issues of ESOL in the workplace back in 2008 and made the following comment:

“ESOL in the workplace is hugely important but complex area in which the question of how ESOL provision can be developed to enable adult speakers of other languages to realise their aspirations, work safely, understand and gain the rights at work, access trade unions, and progress in employment is important. Work is often the most effective site for learning for employed adults.”

ESOL needs to be more targeted, individually tailored and set in a context of wider training and employment support. Endless cycles of language training without a more specific context can have very limited benefits.

The way forward

In relation to the provision of support for training and employment related support, refugees are often included within wider categories of “vulnerable groups” (for example Business in the Community Back to Work programme). This provision can be useful, but evidence from focus groups, individual experience and research suggests that a scheme which was more targeted on the specific circumstances of refugees would be valuable. These specific circumstances include:

- In many cases refugees have previously obtained intermediate or high level qualifications or work experience.
- Refugees in most cases have a very significant gap in their work history due to the time spent assessing asylum applications and because in the UK asylum seekers cannot work.
- Refugees have high levels of motivation and enterprise but lack cultural and social integration.
- Refugees often lack practical experience and understanding of workplaces in the UK

Finding ways to work directly to provide opportunities and support with major employers (public and private) across the city and sub region would be a major step forward.

Developing a project to work directly with employers that closely match the skills of the refugee, embed English language into a daily schedule that is work related will allow for a more efficient process and be less time consuming and less of a financial drain on funding. The support would come from a work mentor who would refer and work directly with an ESOL teacher to support and manage the process.

We have an opportunity to write a work related programme and have this accredited through NCFE. I envisage this to follow the same structure as an NVQ; which recognises the skills and knowledge a person needs to do a job. The individual would need to demonstrate and prove their competency in their chosen role and develop their command of the English language. ESOL can be directly embedded and written into a work competency qualification that would also have a dual purpose and confirm the level and ability of the skills the learner gained in their home country.

Refugees want to work, by not offering them the opportunities to continue with higher level education or already established careers we are adding to the misconceptions regarding refugees and the impact and effect they have on society, communities and government spending.

Next steps

Practical next steps required in our view include:

- 1) Acknowledgement of the greater priority that needs to be accorded to support for employment and economic opportunity as part of the resettlement and integration process for refugees
- 2) The provision of more integrated, holistic and coordinated support for asylum seekers and refugees in Bristol / West of England through the engagement of all

stakeholders in policy development as well as delivery and through joint provision and working.

- 3) Elaboration of targeted training, employment support (including ESOL) and enterprise development actions aimed at meeting the specific needs of refugees (as discussed above) which are not always catered for through generic initiatives aimed at “vulnerable groups”
- 4) Development of a closer relationship with major employers to focus on recruitment, placements, mentoring, recognition of qualifications and experience in order to provide real job opportunities and value adding experience.
- 5) Organisations concerned with economic development, in Bristol and the West of England, to put the utilization of the abilities of all communities including refugees more centrally within their objectives and spending priorities within their wider economic strategy.
- 6) To ensure exchange of experience and good practice in relation to employment and economic development support between other cities and regions within the UK, EU and beyond.

ⁱ Held in June 2016 with 20 participants