

# Employing Refugees: Some Organisations' Experiences

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IES aims to help bring about sustainable improvements in employment policy and human resource management. IES achieves this by increasing the understanding and improving the practice of key decision makers in policy bodies and employing organisations.

# Foreword

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Employment is a key element in the Government's strategy to promote the effective integration of refugees in the UK. The success of this strategy depends on the willingness of employers to make use of the skills and experience that refugees bring with them.

This research explores the attitudes of employers towards refugees and highlights the main issues. I hope that this brief publication will help to inform those who are in a position to make a difference, and to stimulate further debate on an important area of public policy.

Since we commissioned this research, the Home Office has confirmed that steps are now being taken to simplify the documents that are issued to 'new' refugees, which will clarify that permission to work has been granted. There are also signs that the provision of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) will be substantially improved.

However, the most worrying feature of this research is the level of anxiety that employers experience over the employment of refugees. The public discourse around asylum policy has created a climate of fear and confusion that has masked the fact that the UK has benefited greatly from the contribution of refugees and other migrants over a very long period of time.

I hope that this research will help employers, and other opinion formers, to address the difficulties, which face refugee job seekers and to work with us to find practical solutions.

Ram Gidoomal CBE  
*Chairman*  
*Employability Forum*

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# 1. Refugees in the UK Labour Market

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Foreign nationals enter the UK to work under a number of different schemes. The largest scheme is the Work Permit scheme, by which employers can recruit from overseas to fill vacancies in employment shortage areas, or where individuals have special skills of relevance to the UK. The annual numbers entering this way have risen to around 180,000 per annum and are expected to rise further as access to work permits becomes easier.<sup>1</sup> Others enter under the Working Holidaymakers Scheme for Commonwealth citizens under 30 years of age. In 2000, 38,500 people came to the UK through that scheme. Most recently, two sectoral schemes for the food processing industry and the tourist industry have been introduced under which employers with recruitment difficulties can recruit 20,000 workers per year. Under the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme, non-EU nationals under 30 can be recruited for up to one year, with a quota of 25,000 for 2003-2004.

Alongside these other categories, there has been a significant number of asylum seekers who have made a claim for asylum in the UK. Those whose claim is accepted are designated refugees. There is no national total of refugees in the UK, but the estimate is around 350,000.<sup>2</sup> In 2002, around 35,000 asylum seekers were granted leave to remain (and therefore permission to work).<sup>3</sup> Refugees make up only a small proportion of migrants; defined as those born outside the UK. In total, around 3.6 million people of working age were born outside the UK.

Although refugees have full employment rights, they face major barriers in the labour market. Indicators of their disadvantage include disproportionately high levels of unemployment and underemployment. At around 36 per cent, their unemployment rate is around six times the national average.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Work and Pensions (2003), *Working to Rebuild Lives. A preliminary report towards a refugee employment strategy.*

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.* p.6

<sup>3</sup> Research Development and Statistics Directorate, Home Office (2003), *Asylum Statistics United Kingdom, 2002*

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.* p.4

In examining the employment difficulties of refugees, many of the recent research studies have focused on the experiences of the refugees, and asylum seekers themselves. There are several studies indicating that people who have been granted refugee status or leave to remain, face considerable barriers in finding employment commensurate with their skills and qualifications.<sup>1</sup>

A major study for the Department for Work and Pensions<sup>2</sup> highlighted the low level of labour market participation by refugees, and the limited range of occupations in which they were employed. Based on a survey of 400 refugees, the study found that less than one-third of refugees were in employment compared with 60 per cent of ethnic minority people. Refugees were also disproportionately concentrated in temporary posts, and less well paid than their ethnic minority counterparts. The two barriers to employment identified most frequently by the refugees were English language and literacy, and lack of work experience.

That research also highlighted, at a general level, reasons for employers' concerns about recruiting people of refugee status. These concerns related to issues such as establishing refugees' legal status and right to work, assessing overseas qualifications, and the level of English language skills. The DWP study recommended that employers receive more information about overseas qualifications and legislation regulating the right to work, as a way of tackling employer discrimination.

However, neither the DWP study, nor other previous research has focused, in detail, on the attitudes and experiences of individual employers. This was the aim of the current IES/Employability Forum study.

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<sup>1</sup> See, eg Bloch A (2002), *Refugees' opportunities and barriers in employment and training*, Department for Work and Pensions, Research Report No 179; Sargeant G, Forna A (2001), *A Poor Reception. Refugees and asylum seekers: welfare or work?* The Work Foundation; Greater London Authority (2002), *Missed opportunities, a skills audit of refugee women in London from the teaching, nursing and medical professions*, GLA; Aldridge F, Waddington S (2001), *Asylum seekers' skills and qualifications audit pilot project*, The National Organisation for Adult Learning.

<sup>2</sup> Bloch A (2002), *Refugees' opportunities and barriers in employment and training*, Department for Work and Pensions, Research Report No.179



## 2. Research Objectives

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In September 2003, the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) was commissioned by the Employability Forum to conduct research to fill a current gap in knowledge about the perceptions, policies and practices of employers towards refugees in the labour market.

The Employability Forum is an independent organisation working with employers, government departments and agencies, and voluntary and refugee organisations to support the integration of refugees into the UK labour market.

Through its networks, the Employability Forum was aware of a number of employers who were taking positive steps to recruit and employ refugees in their workforce. However, there has been a shortage of examples in the public domain that can be used as good practice models, of how employers are integrating refugees within their workforce.

The aim of this research was, therefore, to find case studies of employers who were taking practical measures to employ refugees and provide detailed examples of their policies and practices in this area.

In undertaking this study, it was agreed that the focus be confined to the employment of refugees. The distinction between an asylum seeker and a refugee is not well understood in the UK, and there tends to be a blurring of categories in coverage of the issue by the media. But in legal terms, the distinction is as follows.

- **Asylum seekers** are people who have made a claim for asylum, but who are awaiting a decision on their claim or appealing against an unsuccessful claim. They are not allowed to work pending a decision. Prior to July 2002, asylum seekers who had been waiting more than six months for a decision had been eligible to apply for a work permit. This concession was withdrawn and asylum seekers do not have the right to work unless they had applied for a work permit before the cut-off date of July 2002.
- **Refugees** are people who have received a favourable decision and are granted Indefinite Leave to Remain in the UK. They have full employment rights, and can claim benefits and take

part in government-funded programmes, for example for the unemployed.

- There is also a category of people whose asylum claim is not successful, but who are granted leave to remain on the basis of their protection needs. This was called Exceptional Leave to Remain (ELR). On 1 April 2003, ELR was replaced by a system called Humanitarian Protection or Discretionary Leave, which is usually granted for three years. People granted Humanitarian Protection also have the right to mainstream benefits and employment support, and are entitled to work.

# 3. Selection of Employers

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## 3.1 Selection of case studies

The Employability Forum has extensive contact with a wide range of employers in different sectors, and made the initial contact with a number of employers known to be positive about recruiting refugees. It was hoped to secure participation by employers in a range of industries, in which relatively large numbers of refugees are employed, such as transport, retail, and hotels and catering.

Some employers who were contacted were not willing to participate. Although they were engaged in various initiatives, they did not want to be interviewed on the issue, despite being assured of anonymity if they requested it. This reluctance appears to be related to concerns about negative publicity, an issue discussed in Section 5.5.

Ten employers did, however, agree to be interviewed. These organisations were:

- Angel Human Resources (recruitment agency)
- Hotel Chain
- Interior Plc (fit-out management and refurbishment specialist)
- Plant Hire Company
- Noon Products Limited
- Warehouse Depot
- Travel West Midlands (a bus company)
- Confectionery Manufacturer
- Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service
- Recycling Plant

Of these, five agreed to their name being used, and the other five wished to remain anonymous.

## **3.2 Interviews with employers**

In each organisation, the IES research team conducted an in-depth interview with one or two senior managers responsible for recruitment, and/or for training or diversity issues.

The interviews were designed to explore the experiences, and attitudes, of employers who had direct experience of recruiting refugees. It also covered the difficulties and barriers they might have encountered, and how they had tried to overcome these difficulties, whether successfully or not.

# 4. Research Findings

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Below we set out some of the key findings from the research, and provide examples from the experience of the case study employers.

## 4.1 Recruitment of refugees

### 4.1.1 Reasons for recruitment

All ten employers had experience of recruiting refugees as employees, or of offering work experience placements. While some employers said that they had not made an explicit decision to recruit refugees, others said that it had been part of a deliberate recruitment strategy. In the latter case, two main reasons lay behind this strategy of targeting refugees for recruitment: labour shortages and a commitment to promote the diversity of the workforce.

An example of a decision to recruit refugees is that of the initiative taken by Travel West Midlands. The company had been experiencing difficulties in recruiting drivers in recent years, mirroring the problems experienced in many parts of the bus industry nationally. The split-shift system requires people with a high level of flexibility, and this means that the industry is continually seeking to widen the pool of labour from which it recruits.

Travel West Midlands became aware that there were a large number of refugees in their operating area, as the West Midlands is included in the asylum seekers dispersal programme. This prompted the company to look at the viability of attracting people from local refugee populations to work as bus drivers.

For Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service (OFRS), a key issue was how to improve the diversity of its workforce, particularly with respect to the low numbers of ethnic minorities and women. Some local employers got together to form the Oxfordshire Employers Race Equality Network (OEREN) to share experiences on how to improve their record on equality issues. At one of the meetings, a speaker from Refugee Resource, a local voluntary organisation, said that they were looking for employers who could provide

refugees with basic workplace training. This was the starting point for OFRS's involvement in taking on refugees, initially on work placement schemes, and more recently on short-term contracts.

#### **4.1.2 Recruitment methods**

Some of the employers in areas with relatively high proportions of refugees said that they used the same channels for recruiting refugees as for all other workers. The Warehouse Depot, for example, said that most refugees were recruited through the recruitment agency they normally used, and from advertisements, in local newspapers.

Noon Products Limited, based in West London, manufactures ready-made Indian meals. The company recruits from the local population, which includes several different communities with refugees including Tamils and Somalis. Of a total workforce of around 1,000 employees, two-thirds are refugees. Although job advertisements are put in the local papers, word-of-mouth recommendation from current employees also plays an important part in recruiting from these communities.

The Confectionery Manufacturer is also based in an area where there are large populations of refugees and asylum seekers, particularly Iraqis, Afghans, and Chechens. The company has been receiving applications from refugees since 2001, and reaches them, but does not specifically target them, through its normal recruitment channels: job centres and the local paper.

For other employers, it has been necessary to embark on specific recruitment initiatives targeted at the refugee population. In most cases, this involved the participation of an outside body, such as the Refugee Council.

The Plant Hire Company ran two recruitment programmes in 2002. An outside consultant was employed to work with the Refugee Council in the West Midlands to recruit potential workers, who all then had to go through an interview process. For each programme, ten refugees were interviewed and four of these recruited. Of the 20 interviewed, eight were recruited: six were Iranian, one Montenegrin and one Afghan.

Travel West Midlands took a major initiative by setting up an induction programme in 2003 to recruit refugees with the appropriate level of skills to work for the company. This is discussed in Section 4.2.3 below.

### 4.1.3 Work placements

One of the recommendations in the earlier DWP study<sup>1</sup> was that there should be work placement opportunities, to enable refugees to use their skills and experiences to gain UK work experience. This experience can then be cited on job applications and CVs and provides the refugee with an employer reference. Work placements were also supported in a recent report, by Camden Council,<sup>2</sup> which recommended that:

*'a sustainable and resourced pilot programme of work placement schemes (aiming for 24 each year) within the Council be developed.'*

This is an approach that has been followed by three of the case study employers who had been involved in work placement schemes. These were the Hotel Chain, OFRS, and most recently Interior.

The Hotel Chain, was initially approached by the Refugee Council in London to participate in a pilot programme of work experience. Eleven applicants were subsequently offered work experience placements in the company. According to the interviewee, three of the 11 refugees who had work experience placements with the company were subsequently offered, and accepted, permanent employment. Contact was also made with the Scottish Refugee Council in Glasgow, and two refugees were taken on in housekeeping jobs in one hotel. This work placement programme was successful in both London and Glasgow.

OFRS initially took on three refugees through Refugee Resource, a voluntary organisation set up to meet the needs of refugees and asylum seekers in Oxfordshire. The scheme involved a work placement for eight weeks, during which the people taken on would not be paid by the employer, but would remain on benefits. In return, the refugees would gain in work experience and confidence. Of the three initially taken on, one worked out particularly well. A young man was taken on in the vehicle workshop – he had prior experience of working in his father's garage in his country of origin. After the initial eight weeks, he was offered and accepted a one-year paid contract in a position created with funding from the New Deal. Although the other two placements did not work out so well, OFRS are committed to participating in the scheme if they find other suitable opportunities. But, they also acknowledged that these placements require a high level of input from supervisors.

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<sup>1</sup> Bloch A (2002), *Refugees' opportunities and barriers in employment and training*, Department for Work and Pensions, Research Report No.179

<sup>2</sup> London Borough of Camden (July 2003), *Working with refugees, report of a scrutiny panel looking at further education, employment and training opportunities for refugees in Camden*.

Their experience of work placements then encouraged OFRS to embark on another initiative to recruit refugees to paid posts. In the past they had tended to use agencies to recruit short-term positions, eg to cover maternity leave or career breaks. These temporary contracts do not have to be advertised externally, and the organisation decided to offer some posts directly to refugees. To do this, Refugee Resource was contacted, and the manager from OFRS went to interview all the refugees on their books. This has resulted in three individuals being offered and accepting posts, and two of these posts received funding through New Deal.

Another recent initiative has been taken by Interior in conjunction with RETAS, the Refugee Education and Training Advisory Service. RETAS is a charitable organisation set up to assist English-speaking refugees in finding employment and work experience. With RETAS, Interior has developed a work placement scheme for refugees who have been granted leave to remain, but are not in a position to take up paid employment because they are still awaiting documentation. The scheme involves a placement of two days a week for six weeks. According to the director of human resources:

*'The aim of the placement is for the individual to get to grips with the environment and the whole office culture in this country, and start to settle. Then, when their papers do arrive, they are in a position to go out and look for a job with some kind of work experience in this country on their CV. That's what helps you find work. Sitting in an interview, being able to sell yourself is the way that the culture and society sells itself, and talk about things in that way, not in a foreign, alien way – I think that's absolutely crucial.'*

The first placement is in the accounts team at head office. The intention is to learn from the first placement, make any necessary changes and then extend the scheme to the project teams.

#### **4.1.4 Sources of recruitment support**

The issue of support for employers, who are seeking to be proactive in recruiting refugees, was mentioned by some of the employers. Those who had taken positive steps tended to mention the important role that voluntary sector organisations had played in facilitating these measures.

Among the names mentioned were the Refugee Council, Refugee Resource in Oxford, and the Refugee Education and Training Advisory Service. The Employability Forum had also been the first port of call for some employers, and they had then been referred to other organisations for specific advice.

For OFRS, the advice provided by Refugee Resource had been crucial to their successful work with refugees, particularly with respect to checking documentation:



*'It is one of those areas that benefit from partnership working. Refugee Resource has expertise in that area, and it is an area in which we'd rather keep working in with other people, than in isolation.'*

Travel West Midlands has received external support from a number of organisations including the Employability Forum, which helped with research materials and contacts, and the West Midlands Consortium for Asylum Seekers and Refugees, which facilitated connections with the refugee communities. However, in the early days of the induction project, there was a lack of support from Jobcentre Plus and the Learning and Skills Councils. The project officer believes the LSC thought it was an employment issue and the responsibility of Jobcentre Plus, while Jobcentre Plus considered it was a skills issue. As a result, the responsibility for involvement in the project got passed around. More recently, support from both bodies has been forthcoming, but the company believes that Travel West Midlands' contribution to providing employment opportunities was not fully appreciated.

## **4.2 Key recruitment and employment issues**

### **4.2.1 Documentation**

All the employers highlighted the issue of checking documentation as a potential barrier to recruiting refugees. Such documentation includes evidence of permission to stay in the UK (and therefore work), as well as evidence of job qualifications and references. As discussed below, many have now developed effective systems for checking documents. But several indicated that they felt there should be more support for employers and a simplified guide to the process. For others, the process had only become manageable because the initial checking was carried out by another organisation, such as the Refugee Council.

Angel Human Resources is a private recruitment agency with branches throughout the UK. It specialises in temporary work in four main sectors: commercial office work, unskilled work in industry; hotel and leisure; and nursing and care. The agency is responsible for checking documentation, before referring staff to a client, and is liable if someone is found to be working illegally. They therefore undertake stringent checks, and can provide their clients with on-site audits to show that the paperwork is all in order.

Their expertise in checking documentation has been developed through a process of *'trial and error'*. This has involved trawling the Internet for information on what paperwork employers need to check, and inviting immigration department officers to advise their consultants what they should look for. But the interviewees at Angel (the managing director and one of the recruitment consultants) believe that it has become increasingly difficult to check the paperwork, because the quality of forgeries has

improved. They are in favour of ID cards, which would make it simpler for employers to be certain who can, and who cannot, be legally employed.

Another difficulty raised by Angel is the issue of references. Many clients require at least two years of reference cover, and this can be very difficult for refugees to obtain.

Interior, which specialises in managing fit-out and refurbishment projects, pointed to the need for companies to have HR functions to check the documentation and understand the correct steps to employing refugees. Often, the trade contractors, with whom they work, are small organisations without access to such expertise.

The time involved in undertaking such checks is undoubtedly a deterrent for some employers. The manager responsible for recruitment says that the attraction of working with the Refugee Council on the work placement scheme was that the Councils undertook the initial documentation check. Otherwise the process of checking would be too time-consuming and costly, compared with the alternative of recruiting migrant workers with work permits through government sectoral schemes that were extended to jobs related to tourism (including hospitality) in Spring 2003.

The depot manager at the Recycling Plant said that the company undertakes careful checks of refugee applicants' documents. But he felt that this process was one for which employers did not receive enough help:

*'There appears to be very little guidance to employers on how to check or verify the accuracy of refugee documentation. Suspect documentation could be avoided if there was a 'fast track' system to check every individual who applies for work. This could be in favour of both the employee and the employer.'*

This view was echoed by the HR manager at the Confectionery Manufacturer, who expressed her concerns about checking documentation and believed there should be more support for employers. She said that:

*'if you have concerns about an individual, there is little help available, whereas if you want information on general principles, that help is readily available.'*

The company has received advice from the Home Office's Immigration and Nationality Directory (IND), but she believes they could be more proactive in keeping employers informed of any changes in the type of documentation.

At Noon, an official from the Home Office came in for half a day to train those involved in recruitment to recognise all the different documents that had to be checked. They also have a direct line to the local office of IND, so that if they have queries they can ring for advice. But the interviewee acknowledged that, if applicants

had an ID card confirming their permission to work, the process would be much easier for employees.

Behind these concerns lies the direct experience of some of our interviewees, of discovering that the documentation was not valid. One employer had verified the documents of the job applicant at the time of interview, and subsequently discovered that the person who presented themselves for work was a different individual. To prevent this, the company has now introduced a new system, whereby a photograph is taken of the applicant at the job offer stage, and this is checked with the individual at the induction stage and on starting employment.

The issue of liability for unwittingly employing an illegal worker seems to be an ongoing concern. The manager at the Confectionery Manufacturer had been reassured by the IND that the company was not liable for employing a worker with forged documents if they had undertaken a proper inspection of the documents. It is accepted by the Government that forgeries can be impossible for an employer to detect, but it seems that employers still feel vulnerable. Furthermore, even if the company is not legally liable, it may be damaged by publicity relating to any finding of illegal workers.

A high profile example, cited by a couple of interviewees, of an employer affected in this way, was that of a major restaurant chain. In May 2003, immigration officials and police arrested 15 suspected illegal immigrant workers in a raid at one of their restaurants. The management had checked the paperwork of all those arrested and said that they appeared to have genuine documents. Although the restaurant was not found to be at fault, and it was accepted that it had followed the correct procedures in processing the employees' papers, the resulting publicity has acted as a deterrent to some other employers.

#### **4.2.2 Language issues for employers**

The second major issue raised by employers was that of the English language skills of refugee job applicants. There was widespread understanding of the reasons why refugees often presented themselves with a low level of language skills and a wish to support them in improving their skills. However, at the same time, several of the interviewees expressed concern that the responsibility for this should not fall largely on the employers themselves.

The level of English required for jobs varied by occupation and skill level. In the Hotel Chain, for example, only basic English was required for housekeeping jobs but receptionists needed to be almost bilingual, as they may be working on their own and have to be able to use the telephone. All the employers in our case studies stressed that a basic level was required for all employees

for health and safety reasons, and so that they could understand instructions and communicate with their line managers.

Several interviewees mentioned lack of basic English as the main reason for either rejecting refugees, or placing them in lower skilled positions than their experience merited. At the Warehouse Depot, lack of proficiency in English was cited as a barrier to progressing to more skilled jobs. Some of these employers had taken steps to provide classes to assist people improve their English.

Noon, for example, has been organising English classes for its staff on company premises since early 2002. The courses are organised by Uxbridge College and funded by the West London Learning Partnership. The courses, of two hours per week for 13 weeks, have been open to all staff and include basic conversation and more advanced courses. A key motivation for employees is that, as their English improves, they are in a better position to benefit from training schemes and progress through the company. By organising the courses on-site, Noon has also maximised their employees' ability to participate.

At the Warehouse Depot, English courses, open to all employees, have also been run. The company recently received government funding to set up a Learndirect Open Learning Centre on-site, in partnership with a local college. Although the initiative has not been targeted specifically at any one group of employees, the skills training will include English language and will clearly benefit refugees.

For Travel West Midlands, the ability to communicate in English is crucial. Given the demands of the job these days, the need for good communication skills amongst drivers is very high. They need to be able to make themselves understood to customers. For insurance purposes, they also need to be able to write reports whenever there is an incident or accident. In the most recent recruitment drive the company had to turn away 15 per cent of applicants because their English language skills were too low.

To address these issues, Travel West Midlands set up two different English language training programmes for bus drivers. In Coventry, working with Adult Education, a course was developed based on the ESOL programme but tailored for bus drivers. In Birmingham, the Pertemps Employment Alliance is training potential drivers in English.

### **4.2.3 Induction programme**

Travel West Midlands has set up a tailored induction programme for refugees, to provide them with the skills required to work for the company. The aim was to provide them with the skills that would enable them to be successful in their applications to be bus drivers.

Prior to setting up the programme, however, an intensive process of understanding the profile and aspirations of the refugee communities had been undertaken by the project officer for this initiative.

Contact was made with the Home Office and the West Midlands Consortium for Asylum Seekers and Refugees to learn more about the dispersal programme and the profile of the local populations. This revealed how the profile of refugee communities varies across the region, including Coventry – with a large population from Afghanistan and increasingly from Congo, and Birmingham – with Iraqi and Somali communities. The project officer identified more than 60 groups working with refugees in the company's three main operating areas.

The initial focus for the project officer was to engage the interest of these groups in the employment opportunities available at Travel West Midlands. This also involved clearly defining that they could only offer such opportunities to refugees with permission to work, and not to asylum seekers. This is a difficult issue, as many support organisations work with both populations.

By May 2003, Travel West Midlands was ready to invite people in to find out more about their backgrounds, and skills. They used this information to develop a procedure for assessing relevant skills relating to driving, English language and maths, and also a process for checking documentation. Ten applicants were accepted onto the first programme. In July, a wider publicity campaign was undertaken to recruit participants. Recruitment posters were placed around Coventry, advertising the scheme in English, French and the two main languages covering Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran. Additionally, 5,000 leaflets in English were distributed through letterboxes in refugee communities. This resulted in 50 applicants, of whom 30 were interviewed and ten were accepted. The first programme began in May 2003, with ten participants. They all received approximately 140 hours of English training, and 11 hours driving tuition, followed by a test. The programme also included bus-driving theory. A second course started in September.

The full induction programme lasted around four months. This is considerably longer than the normal application process. Successful applicants who pass a full driving licence check, English language, mathematics and highway code tests, and an interview and a driving assessment, usually receive induction training of only two weeks.

The length of time involved in the refugee induction programme is an issue that Travel West Midlands is examining to see how it can be streamlined. The length of the programme is believed to have affected the retention rate. Of the original ten participants, only two stayed until the end of the course.

A major barrier to retention is financial, according to the project officer. The company has found that some participants cannot afford to depend on benefits for so long, due to family commitments both in this country and their country of origin. Some of them have left the programme to take up other jobs. Work is available in other industries, such as warehouse work and fork lift operating, both of which pay more than bus driving, and require less direct communication with customers. Low unemployment rates in, for example, Coventry have pushed up wage rates in these jobs.

Travel West Midlands is trying to address the high drop-out rate by keeping in more regular contact with participants during the programme, and trying to address individual problems or requirements as they arise.

#### **4.2.4 Retention issues**

Some of the case study employers mentioned the problem of retention as a barrier to investing large resources in training refugees. The two key issues are the financial problems for refugees, as highlighted by Travel West Midlands above, and the fact that some refugees have qualifications above the jobs which they initially enter.

In the hospitality sector, the Hotel Chain has found that some migrant workers, including refugees, leave once their English has improved to find jobs more in line with their qualifications. Some of those on work placements had been professionals, such as engineers in their homeland. As their language skills improved, the interviewee believed that they would look for other work with increased pay, and benefits related to their qualifications and previous experience.

However, some of the other employers also said that, once employed, the retention rates for refugees were relatively high. At the Recycling Plant, for example, although retention is a major issue for the company, the turnover amongst refugees tended to be lower.

#### **4.2.5 Costs of employment**

The estimate of the financial costs involved in the employment of refugees varied between employers. One item mentioned by several employers was that of the costs of checking documentation. Angel Human Resources said that the time involved in checking documents meant that they had to charge their clients more. The Confectionery Manufacturer said that there were costs involved in training HR colleagues to recognise the correct documentation, a view echoed by other interviewees.

OFRS also mentioned additional costs at the induction stage because language barriers meant that it took longer to go through the training manuals. The refugees have also required more supervision initially, and one of the managers has met with the group two or three times a week.

Another cost, mentioned by a few employers, was that of making provision of facilities for refugee workers. However, it was acknowledged that provision, such as prayer rooms, might be necessary in workplaces with employees from different cultures whether or not they had refugee status.

Companies that have engaged in more extensive skills training programmes, such as Travel West Midlands, have inevitably incurred higher costs. These include, for Travel West Midlands, a funded project officer for six months and associated office expenses.

#### **4.2.6 Benefits of employing refugees**

Some of the costs cited above are seen as being outweighed by the benefits. For example, although OFRS has invested in staff time and resources, they believe *'the payback far outweighs the cost'*. It is cheaper to employ people than use agency staff, and pay agency rates, to fill vacancies.

Several employers also mentioned benefits other than financial, in particular the assets of a cross-cultural workforce. However, they also stressed that this needs to be carefully communicated to the workforce. At Travel West Midlands, they are making efforts to communicate to staff the reality of the refugee experience. For example, they plan to publish internally the story of one of their own bus drivers, a Bosnian refugee who came to the UK a few years ago and has now become a British citizen. They hope the example will enable staff to see how refugees can be proud of their input into the society and economy. At OFRS, all staff are put through a diversity training programme, and efforts are being made to promote the integration of refugees in activities both inside and outside the workplace. The interviewees believe that their staff:

*'have benefited from working with refugees and understanding the reality of their situation, and some of the hardships they have gone through.'*

In addition, several employers mentioned the high calibre of the refugees they have employed as a benefit. The interviewee at the Confectionery Manufacturer reflects that:

*'if that group of employees had not been there in the last two years, would we have been able to maintain the calibre of staff we currently have? Probably not.'*

Similarly, at the Warehouse Depot, the interviewee praised the performance of the refugees they have employed, and said that excluding refugees from the pool of labour would be detrimental:

*'if you are excluding people, then you are not necessarily going to have the best people for the job. That is what we are looking for really.'*

At the Recycling Plant, Noon and OFRS, mention was also made of the strong work ethic, and the satisfaction for the employer in providing work that allows refugees to retain their dignity and self-respect. Travel West Midlands consider that they now have a much better understanding of the problems and barriers faced by refugees looking for employment in the UK and the experience has enabled them to review their training and recruitment process.

#### **4.2.7 Going public**

Despite the positive attitudes of the case study employers, there is still a reticence about publicising their initiatives. This is reflected in the fact that five out of the ten case studies wished to maintain anonymity.

The main reason for wishing to remain anonymous was the fear of receiving hostile media coverage, and this in turn affecting their customers and the rest of their workforce. The Warehouse Depot interviewee believes that employers are afraid that they may have done something wrong unknowingly, and the publicity will lead to investigations by the Home Office. Interior thought that other employers were afraid that speaking out about employing refugees would trigger an *ad hoc* investigation by the immigration officials. Angel Human Resources said:

*'Employers believe that the public perception towards refugees is so negative, that speaking out about it could threaten their custom. The public impression is that refugees are coming in and stealing jobs. This stems from the media, so it is the responsibility of this industry to provide positive press, although positive press is not news.'*

A similar view was expressed by the project officer at Travel West Midlands:

*'Many organisations are fearful of publicising positive steps to employ refugees, because they are aware of the implications of publicity being manipulated and turned against them. The Government could play its part by being more open about its own views on migration and the UK labour market problems, explaining them in more depth through the popular press instead of pandering to the popular press.'*

The manager at the Recycling Plant concurred with this view of the media:

*'Success stories need to be highlighted more than the negative aspects of employing refugee workers. If employers knew how beneficial this could be for their organisation, they would not be reluctant to recruit and employ refugees.'*



The effect of hostile publicity can affect employees as well as employers. At the Confectionery Manufacturer, the interviewee mentioned that the negative attitudes conveyed through the media could influence other employees in the company's workforce. She cited the '*myths*' circulated by the media that refugees have an easy life in the UK with everything laid on, whereas in fact they are frequently working very hard for only the minimum wage. '*We have not had major issues here*', she said, '*but sometimes there can be an undercurrent.*'

While it might be argued that much of the media coverage is concerned with illegal workers rather than refugees, employers are aware that this distinction is not well understood. In particular, the distinction between asylum seekers and refugees, while important in terms of legal status and right to work, is not understood by much of the public. Therefore, a negative story about asylum seekers can easily rebound on the popular perception of refugees.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

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These ten case studies have provided examples from employers with direct experience of taking steps to recruit refugees. It would not, however, be appropriate to draw any firm conclusions on the basis of a small number of organisations. However, their experiences do highlight certain common issues and it is these that are outlined in this concluding chapter.

The report has shown that these employers can point to the benefits of recruiting refugees. Amongst these are the commitment and productivity of many refugees, and the gains for the whole workforce from increasing cultural diversity.

But there were also a number of barriers that employers encountered in taking such steps. Chief amongst these were problems relating to the difficulties of checking documentation, and the low levels of English language skills. Examples have been selected to illustrate the range of measures being taken by employers to overcome these barriers. These include providing work placements, setting up induction and English language schemes, and allocating resources to deal effectively with the documentation.

It is clear from the interviews that these employers do not feel that the responsibility, and the costs, for taking these steps should be left to the individual employer. This is partly because the high labour turnover in some industries means that major investment by individual employers in special provisions for refugees is simply not cost-effective. But it is also because those committed to equal opportunities and a diverse workforce believe that refugees should have access to employment in all sectors, rather than in a small number of organisations.

The employers in these case studies are amongst those committed to opening employment opportunities to refugees. There were a number of suggestions, made by one or more of these employers, that they considered might encourage other organisations to recruit and retain refugees. Some of these are set out below.

## 5.1 Documentation

There was a consensus that more accessible support for employers, in checking documentation of potential applicants of refugee status, was urgently needed. This could include a clear step-by-step guide prepared by the Government. It was also acknowledged that small employers, without a specialised personnel function, do not have the resources to trawl for the necessary information. As one employer put it:

*'I think they should issue a one-page guideline that the smallest employer can read. It would say this is what you must do; this is what it must look like'. Here's a number you can call for help. And when you get help you don't get people knocking on the door.'*

Many employers also thought ID cards would help to make it easier to check applicants' right to work.

## 5.2 Important role of voluntary sector organisations

Several interviewees cited voluntary sector organisations as their first point of contact for employing refugees. It appears that these organisations are playing a crucial role in promoting employment opportunities for refugees. However, such organisations are more proactive in some parts of the country than others, resulting in great variation in their impact on local employers. If these organisations are to be a major source of support for employers throughout the country, it seems that more effective means of co-ordinating these efforts is now required.

## 5.3 The value of work placement schemes

Several employers have undertaken to provide opportunities for refugees, to gain work experience through work placement schemes. These case studies have shown that the experience has been very valuable for the few that have introduced a scheme, and these employers would welcome further placements of this kind. For the refugees, such placements enable them to overcome the barriers of lacking UK work experience or UK employer references.

## 5.4 Language training

The employers saw lack of English language skills as a major barrier, particularly for entry to more skilled jobs. General English language courses were not seen as adequate in providing the work-specific vocabulary that was required in some occupations. *Ad hoc* schemes funded by individual companies were seen as placing the onus, and the cost, disproportionately on those companies. An investment in tailored government-funded work-

related training for refugees, to improve both their job skills and their language skills, was seen as crucial.

## 5.5 Tackling negative media

Concerns about organisations employing refugees being targeted for negative media publicity, were widely expressed by the case study interviewees. It was the main reason why so many organisations in this study requested anonymity, although at the outset of the study they were prepared to be identified. This fear of negative publicity is likely to be a significant barrier to other employers considering recruiting refugees.

In some areas of labour market disadvantage (eg gender, disability or older workers) the Government has introduced legislation to prevent discrimination, and endorsed campaigns to encourage employers to promote equal opportunities for these disadvantaged groups. In the case of refugees, the focus has appeared to be on policies to control illegal immigration, rather than promoting employment opportunities for refugees.

It is clear, however, from the DWP's preliminary report<sup>1</sup> on its refugee employment strategy, that there is now a government commitment to extending and improving employment support for refugees, and tackling the disadvantages they face in the labour market. The experience of the small number of employers in this study suggests that the success of any strategy, may rest on the ability to create a more positive climate, in which employers can be confident of employing refugees without finding themselves subjected to an unwelcome media spotlight.

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Work and Pensions (2003), *Working to Rebuild Lives. A preliminary report towards a refugee employment strategy.*

# 6. Annex

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## 6.1 List of organisations

The Employability Forum  
2nd Floor, Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX  
Tel: 020 7981 0375  
[www.employabilityforum.co.uk](http://www.employabilityforum.co.uk)

Immigration and Nationality Directorate (Home Office)  
Lunar House, 40 Wellesley Road, Croydon CR9 2BY  
Tel: 0870 606 7766  
[indpublicenquiries@ind.homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:indpublicenquiries@ind.homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk)  
[www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk](http://www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk)

Learning and Skills Council  
Cheylesmore House, Quinton Road, Coventry CV1 2WT  
Tel: 0845 019 4170  
[www.lsc.gov.uk](http://www.lsc.gov.uk)

Oxfordshire Employers Race Equality Network  
[www.oeren.info](http://www.oeren.info)

The Refugee Council  
240 Ferndale Road, Brixton, London, SW8 1SJ  
Tel: 0207 820 3000  
[www.refugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk)

Refugee Resource  
Hooper House, Second Floor, 3 Collins Street, Oxford, OX4 1XS  
Tel: 0845 458 0055

Refugee Education Training and Advisory Service (RETAS)  
14 Dufferin Street, London, EC1Y 8PD  
Tel: 0207 426 5800  
[www.education-action.org](http://www.education-action.org)

West Midlands Consortium for Asylum Seekers and Refugees  
The Regional Partnership Centre, Albert House, Quay Place,  
Edward Street, Birmingham, B1 2RA  
Tel: 0121 678 1036

Work Permits UK  
Immigration and Nationality Directorate, Home Office, Level 5,  
Moorfoot, Sheffield S1 4PQ  
Tel: 0114 259 4074  
customrel.workpermits@wpuk.gov.uk  
www.workingintheUK.gov.uk

## 6.2 Selected references

Aldridge F, Waddington S (2001), *Asylum seekers' skills and qualifications audit pilot project*, The National Organisation for Adult Learning

Bloch A (2002), *Refugees' opportunities and barriers in employment and training*, Department for Work and Pensions, Research Report No.179

Department for Work and Pensions (2003), *Working to Rebuild Lives. A preliminary report towards a refugee employment strategy*

Greater London Authority (2002), *Missed opportunities, a skills audit of refugee women in London from the teaching, nursing and medical professions*, GLA

London Borough of Camden (July 2003), *Working with refugees: report of a scrutiny panel looking at further education, employment and training opportunities for refugees in Camden*

Sargeant G, Forna A (2001) *A Poor Reception. Refugees and asylum seekers: welfare or work?* The Work Foundation