

ICAR Briefing - September 2008

Employment issues for refugees and asylum seekers in the UK

I. Introduction

Research on the issue of refugee employment not only looks at the barriers that refugees and asylum seekers face when trying to secure suitable work, but also uses the employment levels and experiences of this group in order to explore various aspects of refugee integration.

Along with health, education and housing, the area of employment has been identified by the Home Office as one of the key indicators of integration, and means to achieving it. Meanwhile refugee issues, including integration, are increasingly treated less in isolation and more as part of the wider policy of managed migration.

This ICAR briefing looks first at relevant legislation and policy before focussing on three selected key issues: the impact of the asylum process; our knowledge base regarding refugees' position within the labour market; and barriers and access to employment. It ends with a list of relevant contacts, including the Strategic Migration Partnerships now overseeing policy implementation on a regional level. The briefing complements ICAR's Navigation Guide on Refugee Employment, which provides more detail on this subject.

2. Law and Policy

Legal context

There is a wide and complex range of legislative and policy instruments affecting refugee employment, drawn from international, European and UK law. A whole range of policy areas also impinge on refugee employment, from immigration and asylum through to welfare and employment more generally. Indeed refugee employment is not dealt with by any one government department.

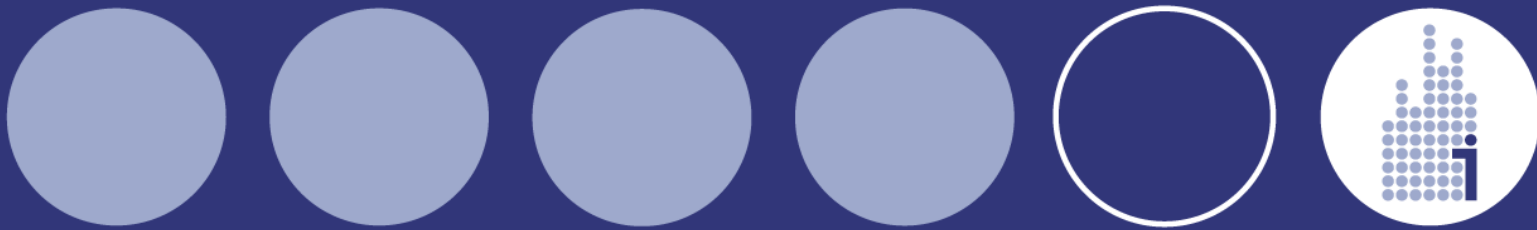
The relevant international law is founded on the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights,¹ the 1951 Refugee Convention and subsequent additions to these two legislative cornerstones, including agreements specifically relating to racial and sexual discrimination.

The tendency for UK law dealing with refugee employment has been to enforce the link between the right to work and the right to remain, in the context of measures against illegal working generally. Thus refugee employment has been dealt with by *immigration* legislation, mostly passed since the mid-1990s:

- Section 8 of the [Asylum and Immigration Act 1996](#) states that only those with the right to live and work in the UK can be employed. This was supplemented by guidance for employers on compliance with race relations law, and in 2004 by [The Immigration \(Restrictions on Employment\) Order 2004](#), which sets out the document checks required of employers in order to comply with Section 8.²
- Section 22 of the [Immigration and Asylum Act 1999](#) prevents employers from discriminating when trying to avoid conviction.
- The [Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002](#) does not deal specifically with the employment of refugees and asylum seekers, but does contain various measures against illegal working generally, (see Sections 147 and 153).
- [The Asylum and Immigration \(Treatment of Claimants, etc.\) Act 2004](#) removes the right of refugees who have received leave to remain to retrospectively claim

¹ See the UNHCR document [Rights of Refugees in the Context of Integration: Legal Standards and Recommendations](#) (June 2006) which is part of their Legal and Protection Policy Research Series.

² See also [Preventing Illegal Working webpage](#)



higher levels of benefits (Section 12). Instead, an integration loan is offered, but only to those with full refugee status. (Section 13).³

- [The Gangmasters \(Licensing\) Act 2004](#) was passed following the drowning of twenty-one Chinese cockle-pickers the previous year, a number of whom had been asylum seekers. Its stated aim was to combat the exploitation of workers and tax evasion by operators and recruiters. A regulatory body, the [Gangmasters Licensing Authority](#) was set up and offences introduced between October 2006 and April 2007.
- The [Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Act 2006](#) gives the government powers to penalise employers of illegal workers, with civil penalties for each illegal worker employed (Section 15). An employers' code of practice addresses to avoid race discrimination in recruitment practice. Section 45 amends the 2004 Act to enable integration loans to be given to refugees given limited leave to enter or remain. The proposals were originally set out in a five year strategy paper [Controlling our borders: Making migration work for Britain](#) (2005).
- The [UK Borders Act \(2007\)](#) included police powers for immigration officers; and measures against illegal working. The proposals were originally contained in the 2006 strategy paper [Fair, effective, transparent and trusted: Rebuilding confidence in our immigration system](#)

Policy context - managed migration

The current UK policy context for refugee employment is found within the shift towards planned or 'managed' migration, in essence an attempt to view all forms of inward migration to the UK within the same policy framework overtly linked to goals of economic sustainability and growth.

³ See [Refugee Council Briefing, Asylum and Immigration Act 2004: an update](#)

This policy is enshrined in a number of key documents:

- the 2002 White Paper *Secure Borders Safe Haven: Integration with Diversity in Modern Britain* (later passed as the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002);⁴
- the 2005 five-year strategy, [Controlling our borders: Making migration work for Britain](#) and consequent policy statements; the illegal working reduction strategies contained in the UK Borders Act 2007;
- the 2007 Home Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office statement on managing global migration entitled [Securing the UK Border: Our vision and strategy for the future](#).⁵ This was followed the same year by [Managing Global Migration: A strategy to build stronger international alliances to manage migration](#),⁶ a strategy paper for policy implementation.

The 2002 White Paper captured the essence of future policy when it stated:

*'[W]e need to send out a signal around the world that we are neither open to abuse nor a 'Fortress Britain'. Our system combines rational and controlled routes for economic migration with fair, but robust, procedures for dealing with those who claim asylum.'*⁷

The 2007 international strategy paper continues to highlight the consistency of the message and reinforces the economic objectives, adding a further goal: 'to help Britain gain a greater share in the global tourism and education market.'⁸

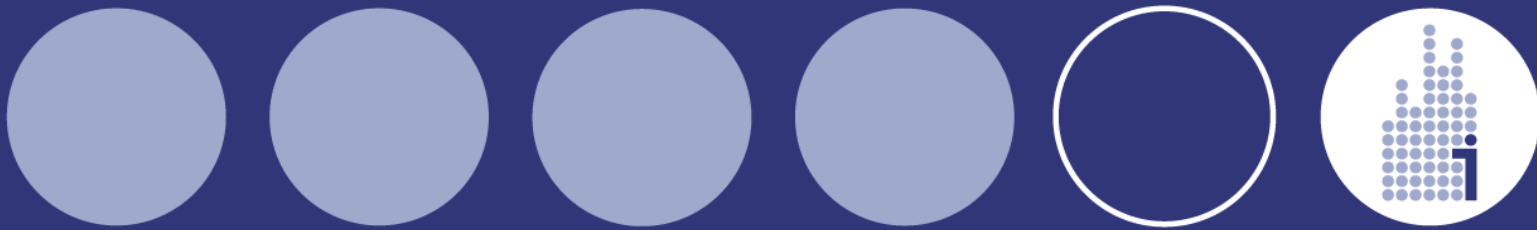
⁴ See the [ICAR Asylum Law and Process Navigation Guide](#)

⁵ Home Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2007)

⁶ Home Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2007), [Managing Global Migration: A strategy to build stronger international alliances to manage migration](#)

⁷ David Blunkett, then Home Secretary in the foreword to [Secure Borders, Safe Haven: Integration with Diversity in Modern Britain](#). See also **Crawley H.** (2002) *Managing Migration: Current entry routes into the UK labour market*, IPPR.

⁸ Op. cit. p. 16



In practice managed migration might best be seen as a flexible, evolving approach towards an ideal rather than a fixed strategy. The Government aims to be able to identify and respond to labour mismatches that are not being addressed by UK citizens or European Economic Area (EEA) nationals, at the same time as reducing unfounded asylum applications and dealing with applications more quickly (see below); making borders tougher to cross without permission; tightening up rules about who should be able to stay permanently in the UK; and making sure that those who have not been given permission to stay leave.

Policy context - integration

Government policy recognises the importance of employment to its goal of refugee integration, which in turn is linked to the wider goal of community cohesion.⁹ Refugee integration is defined in the consultation paper for the new Refugee Integration and Employment Service (RIES) as:

*'the process that takes place when refugees are empowered to achieve their full potential as members of British society, to contribute to the community, to access public services and to become fully able to exercise the rights and responsibilities they share with other residents of the UK.'*¹⁰

This recognition has meant that since employment and refugee integration were first linked on a policy level, those granted full refugee status or time-limited protection have been promised 'quick and effective help to aid their integration into UK society'.¹¹ And indeed the new RIES model of providing the additional help that may be needed envisages a much stronger role for employment-related activities.¹²

The Home Office's own research indicates that employment is central not only as stand-alone indicator of integration but also for its potential

in underpinning or reinforcing many of the other social, cultural and political indicators of integration.¹³

Successive reports have shown that refugees' own goals largely match these indicators and their "desire to contribute to British society, rather than always being the recipients of government support and charity."¹⁴ They also identify the 'psychosocial' benefits of employment in giving refugees a sense of control over their own lives.¹⁵

Until recently, the integration strategy guiding refugee employment policy was based on two major papers: the Home Office's [Integration Matters](#),¹⁶ and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)'s [Working to Rebuild Lives: a Refugee Employment Strategy](#). Published in 2004 and 2005 respectively, they provided the framework for integrating refugees following a positive decision on their asylum claim. However by 2008 the impact of the turn towards 'managed migration' indicated a shift in the way government tackled the issue of refugee employment.

Firstly, the Minister for Communities and Local Government (CLG) published [Managing the Impacts of Migration: A cross-government approach](#),¹⁷ in which it announced that it would be revising Integration Matters. Secondly, the Corporate Stakeholder Group (CSG) replaced the old [National Refugee Integration Forum](#) (NRIF), which had been set up to monitor and develop the DWP's Refugee Employment Strategy.

¹³ Ager, A. and Strang, A. (2004) [Indicators of Integration: Final Report](#), Home Office Development and Practice Report 27

¹⁴ Atfield, G., Brahmabhatt, H. and O'Toole, T. (2007) [Refugees' Experiences of Integration](#), Refugee Council, p. 66.

Macdonald, S. and Barnard, H. (2006) [Evaluating ERF and Challenge Fund Services report](#), Home Office Online Report 22/06. For the broader policy context but with specific reference to the refugees and the refugee sector see

Cooke, S. and Spencer S. (2006) [The Integration of Migrants: Engaging Employers, Unions and the Voluntary Sector](#), Oxford: Compas

¹⁵ Rutter, J. with Cooley, L., Reynolds, S. and Sheldon, R. (2007) [From Refugee to Citizen: 'Standing On My Own Two Feet'. A research report on integration, 'Britishness' and citizenship](#), Metropolitan Support Trust and IPPR

¹⁶ Home Office (2004) [Integration Matters: A National Strategy for Refugee Integration](#), and DWP (2005) [Working to Rebuild Lives: a Refugee Employment Strategy](#)

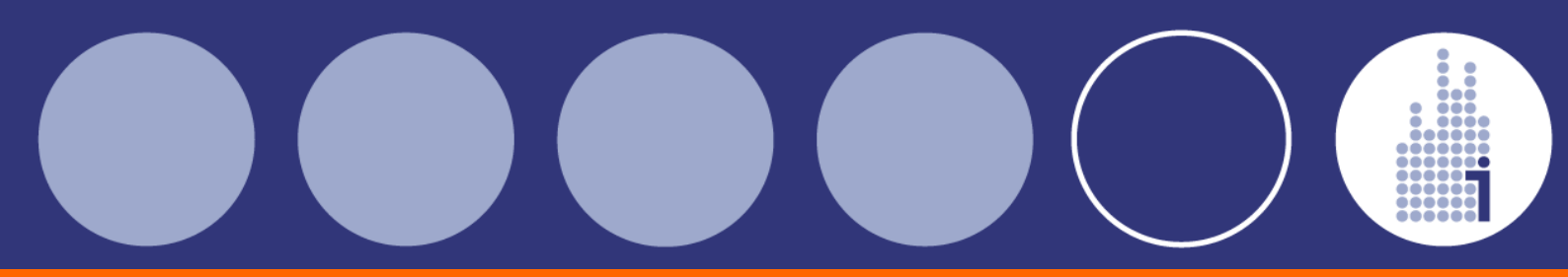
¹⁷ See Chapter 4 (Cohesion and Integration) of Communities and Local Government (2008) [Managing the Impacts of Migration: A Cross-Government Approach](#)

⁹ As expressed by the Commission on Integration and Cohesion in its 2007 final report., [Our Shared Future](#)

¹⁰ Home Office (2006) [A New Model for National Refugee Integration Services in England: Consultation Paper](#)

¹¹ [Home Office White Paper Secure Borders Safe Haven Integration with Diversity in Modern Britain](#) (2002) p. 15

¹² Different structures apply in London where the Mayor has responsibility for refugee integration through a high-level [Board for Refugee Integration in London](#) (BRIL). The link body for BRIL on the employment, training and enterprise element is [LORECA](#) (London Refugee Economic Action).



The CSG covers all aspects of migration rather than just refugee integration, and is intended to be a forum where the Home Office can share information on migration policies and practice and consult with relevant stakeholders. Unlike the NRIF, the CSG does not have 'sub-groups' focussing on specific issues such as employment.

Along with the CSG, a number of other bodies are considered strategic stakeholder groups by the Borders Agency. These include the [Migration Impacts Forum](#) (MIF) - assigned to build evidence on how migration affects public services and local communities; the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC), which is made up of economists and advises on labour market shortages; and the National Migration Group (NMG), created to facilitate dialogue between the SMPs, the Home Office and other key stakeholders on policy and operational migration issues, including the National Asylum Stakeholder Forum.

Strategic Migration Partnerships (SMPs) are the bodies which since 2007 have been charged with implementing managed migration policy at a regional and local level. They replace the old regional consortia, so that migrant workers are included in their remit as well as refugees and asylum seekers. They are funded through an 'enabling grant' from the Home Office and facilitate joint work and consultation between regional actors and the UK Border Agency (UKBA) on migration issues, including employment.

The new [Refugee Integration and Employment Service](#) (RIES) is a service for new refugees who have been given humanitarian protection or refugee status. It aims to offer a 'standard package' of integration services for all new refugees.¹⁸ Regional contracts for providing this package have now been awarded through the UKBA regional structure to various organizations which will provide the service from October 1 2008. This follows pilots for the Strategic Upgrade of National Refugee Integration Services (Sunrise) model set up in 2005.

¹⁸ BIA (2007), *Refugee Integration and Employment Service, pre-qualification questionnaire*. See also Home Office (2006) [A New Model for National Refugee Integration Services in England: Consultation Paper](#)

Refugee Integration and Employment Service (RIES)

- the new pilot integration service, RIES, will offer a limited service over a 12-month period covering three elements:

- an advice and support service to address initial needs such as housing, education and benefits;
- an employment advice service to help the person enter long-term employment at the earliest opportunity;
- a mentoring service offering the person an opportunity to be matched with a mentor from the receiving community.

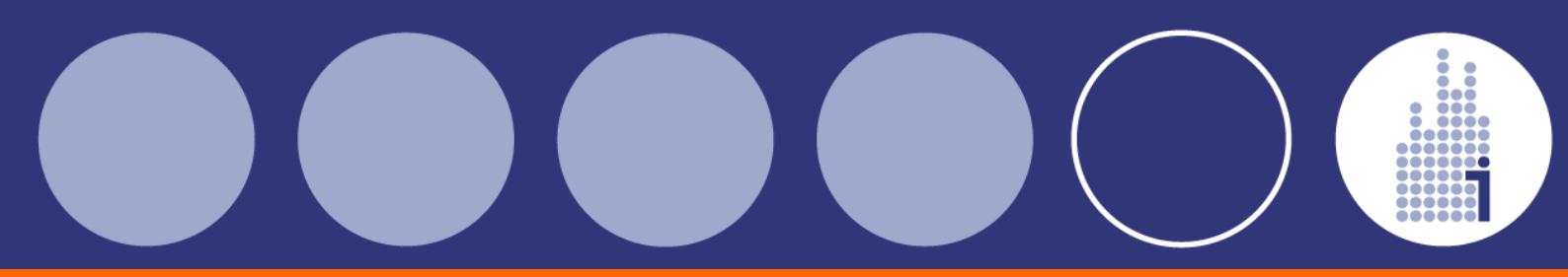
Within a few days of receiving refugee status or humanitarian protection, the person will be referred to a personal case manager who will develop an individual integration plan and help the person to meet urgent needs.

UKBA expect that at least 30% of people who accept help from the RIES will find work within 12 months of receiving their status.

Along with all of the above, a number of related developments from outside of the UKBA are also worth noting:

- [Improving Opportunity Strengthening Society](#) (2005) is the Government's cross-cutting strategy to increase race equality and community cohesion. The CLG website includes a separate page within its Community Cohesion section on [employment](#)
- The [Review of Migrant Integration Policy in the UK](#) alongside [Managing the Impacts of Migration](#) formed the government's response to the 2007 findings of the CLG-sponsored [Commission on Integration and Cohesion](#). Part of the Review dealt with how the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) would work with employers in the restructuring of ESOL provision. The DIUS has identified refugees as one of the target groups which future ESOL provision should cater,¹⁹ and has launched a [consultation](#) on its strategy to focus ESOL on community cohesion.
- [Opportunity for All](#) is the annual Government report about tackling

¹⁹ See Community and Local Government (2008) [Review of Migrant Integration Policy in the UK](#)



poverty and social exclusion. It includes a link to the [Ethnic Minorities Task Force](#) website and their Public Service Agreement target 4c – to increase the employment rate of ethnic minorities.

- The Treasury-commissioned [Leitch Review](#) reported in December 2006 on the UK's long-term skills needs until 2020.
- The DWP and DIUS have set up the Adult Advancement and Careers Service (AACS) as a means of combining welfare changes and skills enhancement. This new system will also be reflected at a regional level by initiatives such as the [London Skills and Employment Strategy](#)²⁰
- The Department for Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) advises employers on good practice towards migrant workers.

Equal Opportunities

Policy and legislation around equal opportunities may well have an impact on work experiences, even where there is little specific focus on refugees.

The [Equality Bill](#)²¹ aims to bring all forms of discrimination within one single Act and make it legal for employers to discriminate in favour of women and ethnic minority candidates in certain circumstances.

The [Equality and Human Rights Commission](#) has commissioned research, to be published in late 2008, on equalities and human rights as relevant to refugees and asylum seekers.²²

The TUC's joint [Commission on Vulnerable Employment](#) reported in 2008 with a short section on asylum seekers, in which it calls for the right to work for those who have waited more than six months for a decision, and for an 'earned regularisation' programme for the undocumented in general.

²⁰ London Skills and Employment Board (2008) [The London Approach: Improving Skills and Employment Outcomes for Londoners](#)

²¹ Government and Equalities Office (2008) [Framework for a Fairer Future - the Equality Bill](#)

²² Watters, C. and Aspinall, A. (2008 forthcoming) Refugees and asylum seekers: a review of equality and human rights implications. Equality and Human Rights Commission.

As the Home Office itself acknowledges, the prevention of illegal working via document checks can raise race discrimination issues.²³ In February 2008 it updated its [Code of Practice](#) for employers on this, at the same time as new penalties came into force. Relevant legislation includes the [Race Relations Act 1976 \(Amendment\) Regulations 2003](#)²⁴ and the [Race Relations \(Amendment\) Act 2000](#).

3. Asylum process and refugee employment

Two aspects of the asylum process have a particular impact on refugee employment: the system of dispersal, and employment restrictions on those awaiting a decision.

The system of 'dispersal' - a no-choice allocation of housing and support for asylum seekers in designated areas while their application is determined²⁵ - was set up to relieve pressure on local authorities, particularly those in traditional areas of refugee settlement in London and the South East, and remains the experience for most asylum seekers. Most of the administrative infrastructure around it, however, has since been reorganised since its introduction in 1999,²⁶ most notably with the New Asylum Model, which became fully operational in 2007.²⁷

The areas for dispersal were originally anticipated to be chosen on the basis of a number of criteria, such as the existence of community networks and welfare support, but a swift timetable for implementation²⁸ effectively gave primacy to the single criteria of a supply of available and affordable housing, thus creating a strong correlation between dispersal areas and

²³ See <http://www.migrantsrights.org.uk> for updates relating to 'Papers please' - a 3 year joint research project by the Migrant Rights Network and Queen Mary College London begun in 2008.

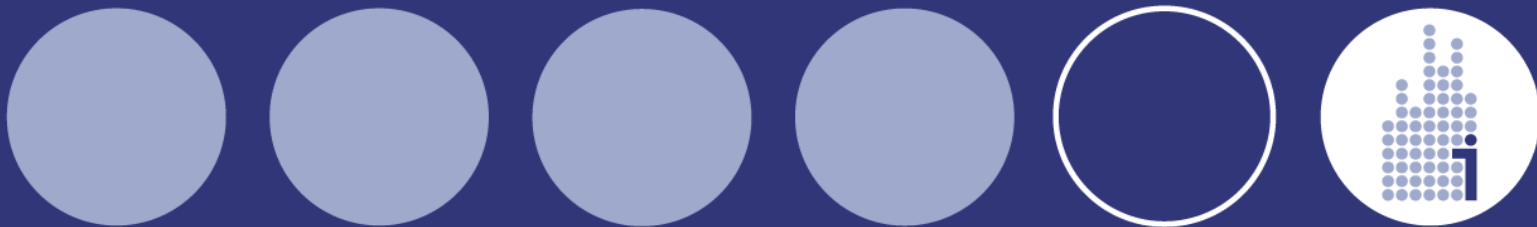
²⁴ The regulations and explanatory notes are at www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2003/20031626.htm

²⁵ See [Hynes, P. \(2006\) *The Compulsory Dispersal of Asylum Seekers and Processes of Social Exclusion in England*](#), Middlesex University

²⁶ Home Office (1998) [Fairer, Faster and Firmer: A modern approach to immigration and asylum](#) leading to the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999

²⁷ Announced in the 2005 [Five Year Strategy for Immigration and Asylum](#) the New Asylum Model of regionalised end-to-end decision-making aims to speed up and improve the process. See <http://www.icar.org.uk/?lid=6002>

²⁸ NASS had only six months from its inception in March 2000 until dispersal went 'live' in October.



recognised areas of deprivation.²⁹ This principle was reinforced by Section 11 of the Asylum and Immigration Act 2004,³⁰ whereby refugees and their families wishing to apply to the local authority under homelessness legislation for housing in an area other than the one in which they were last supported (normally the dispersal area) would have to show a stronger local connection to the other area. The anticipation was that this would encourage refugees to stay in their dispersal area when making the transition from Home Office support to mainstream housing, although it is likely that there has been a significant level of 'secondary migration', particularly to London.³¹

New policy shifts reinforce the link with the dispersal area: the new Refugee Integration and Employment Service (see Law and Policy) will be restricted to service users who stay in the same area following the decision on their asylum claim.³² Thus refugees will continue to be connected to areas that have high levels of unemployment and deprivation.

The second key factor in relation to asylum policy is the decision to prevent asylum seekers from working whilst their claim is being determined. In theory, allowing asylum seekers to work immediately upon their arrival in the UK could save money for the taxpayer by reducing the financial and material support needed during their application period. However, present government policies are based on the belief that being allowed to work on arrival in the UK would act as an additional 'pull' factor in attracting more asylum seekers and economic migrants posing as asylum seekers to the UK.³³

That is why in 2002, amidst protest from the refugee sector, the government removed the concession that gave asylum seekers permission to work after they had been waiting over six months for a decision on their case. Opponents also maintained that given the lengthy appeals

process and the fact that many initial decisions may still not be made within six months, exclusion from the labour market could affect processes of integration. Many organisations also suggested that the public and asylum seekers themselves support the notion that, where possible, asylum seekers should be given the opportunity to provide for themselves and contribute to the economy.³⁴ In the event, a European Council Directive³⁵ was implemented in February 2005 allowing asylum seekers to apply for permission to work if they have not received a decision after 12 months.³⁶

There are continued calls from refugees themselves, local advocates and national organisations such as the TUC and Refugee Council³⁷ for asylum seekers to be able to work from six months or earlier, and for the concession to be extended to 'failed' asylum seekers who cannot be returned to their country of origin. It is argued that a significant percentage of asylum seekers are eventually given refugee status or other forms of temporary protection anyway,³⁸ and that evidence suggests that obtaining employment helps asylum seekers to both integrate in the host country and overcome mental health problems relating to war, trauma and exile.³⁹ In addition, it has been argued that there is no significant evidence in support of the 'pull' factor argument.⁴⁰

²⁹ Carter, M. and El Hassan, A. (2003) *Between NASS and a hard place*, hact; Hynes, P. (2006) *The Compulsory Dispersal of Asylum Seekers and Processes of Social Exclusion in England*, Middlesex University

³⁰ Amending the homelessness legislation contained in Section 199 of the Housing Act 1996.

³¹ *Response from the Mayor of London* to Home Office consultation *A New Model for National Refugee Integration Services in England*, (2006)

³² *Refugee Integration and Employment Service: Pre-qualification questionnaire*, September 2007, p. 4, section 2.1

³³ See [David Blunkett's statement of 29th October 2001](#)

³⁴ See for example, the position of [the Refugee Council](#)

³⁵ EC Directive 2003/9/EC of 27 January 2003

³⁶ Although there is currently a lack of Home Office data on the numbers applying for such permission.

³⁷ See Refugee Council Policy Response (2007) [Social Exclusion, Refugee Integration, and the Right to Work for Asylum Seekers](#) and the [Let Them Work](#) campaign launched by the TUC and Refugee Council in 2008. Also [Atfield, G., Brahmhatt, H. and O'Toole, T. \(2007\) Refugees' Experiences of Integration](#), Refugee Council, p. 66. For the broader policy context but with specific reference to the refugees and the refugee sector see [Cooke, S. and Spencer S. \(2006\) The Integration of Migrants: Engaging Employers, Unions and the Voluntary Sector](#), Oxford: Compass

³⁸ [Bennett, K., Heath, T., and Jeffries, R. \(2007\), Asylum Statistics United Kingdom 2006](#), London: Home Office, p.18.

³⁹ See for example the findings of a recent report on migrants: [M. Shields and S. Wheatley Price \(2002\) The Labour Market Outcomes and Psychological Well-being of Ethnic Minority Migrants in Britain](#) Home Office Online Report 07/03

⁴⁰ [Bloch, A. \(2004\) Making it Work: Refugee employment in the UK](#), Asylum and Migration Working Paper, IPPR, p. 9



4. Refugees in the labour market

Information and statistics on refugee employment are generally patchy, non-uniform and without the benefit of longitudinal analysis or large-scale data sets. But what is known suggests more potential than fulfilment, despite the government emphasis on the place of employment within integration.

Research on refugee employment has been fairly consistent since the mid-1990s in finding high levels of unemployment.⁴¹ Refugees and asylum seekers who are employed mainly work in catering and hospitality, interpreting, retail, cleaning, security, factory, administrative and clerical jobs.⁴² As with many ethnic minority groups, they have significantly lower levels of employment and wages than the UK-born population. Linked to this is the issue of refugee underemployment – being employed below one's skills level. And as with ethnic minorities more generally, some ethnic groups among refugees are more successful in the labour market than others.⁴³

The only estimate of the average level of refugee unemployment rate remains that provided by the DWP in 2003, which it set at around 36% - around six times the then national average.⁴⁴ However the figure is based on relatively old and small-scale work.

Despite the limitations of the DWP report, subsequent research has consistently found similar, or higher, levels of unemployment. Alice Bloch's research for the DWP in 2002⁴⁵ remains the largest survey of refugee employment, and

was the precursor to the 2005 Refugee Employment Strategy. It found that on the basis of a survey of 400 refugees and asylum seekers from five different countries, living in five regions in England and who had been in the UK for different lengths of time, the level of labour market activity was very low indeed. Only 29% of refugees were working at the time of the survey compared with 60% of the ethnic minority population as calculated using Labour Force Survey data. Within this sample, men were more likely to be employed than women, by a margin of 15% compared to 42% of men.

The research found that in comparison with the wider ethnic minority population, refugees experience greater job insecurity and have fewer entitlements in the workplace. Importantly, refugees were also found to be earning on average 79% of what ethnic minorities in the UK earn on average per hour, with more than one-tenth earning less than the minimum wage. However, there was a notable disparity between the five communities under study, with Tamils were the most likely to be employed and Somalis were the least likely to have a job.

Tamils were the group most likely to be working, with 36% of these respondents in employment at the time of the survey, whilst Somalis were much less likely to have a job, with only 16% of respondents employed. Another report by Bloch⁴⁶ continued to explore comparative unemployment rates, finding that Somalis level of employment rate was 38% compared to 48% for Turks, 78% for Iraqis and 81% for Zimbabweans. Elsewhere, census country of birth information for 2005 showed that in some 'refugee countries of birth' the unemployment rate was extremely high: for Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo only 16% and 28% respectively were in work.⁴⁷

Thus despite the lack of a clear or uniform dataset or precise consensus on proportions, there is consistent data indicating that refugees occupy a disadvantaged position in the labour market: employment rates are low and

⁴¹ Somerville, W. and Wintour, P. (2006) 'Integration of new migrants: employment' in Spencer, S. (ed) [Refugees and other new migrants: a review of the evidence on successful approaches to integration](#), COMPAS

⁴² Shiferaw, D. and Hagos, H. (2002) *Refugees and progression routes to employment*, Refugee Council and PLRTEN; Bloch, A. (2002), [Refugees' opportunities and barriers in employment and training](#), Department for Work and Pensions Research Report 179.

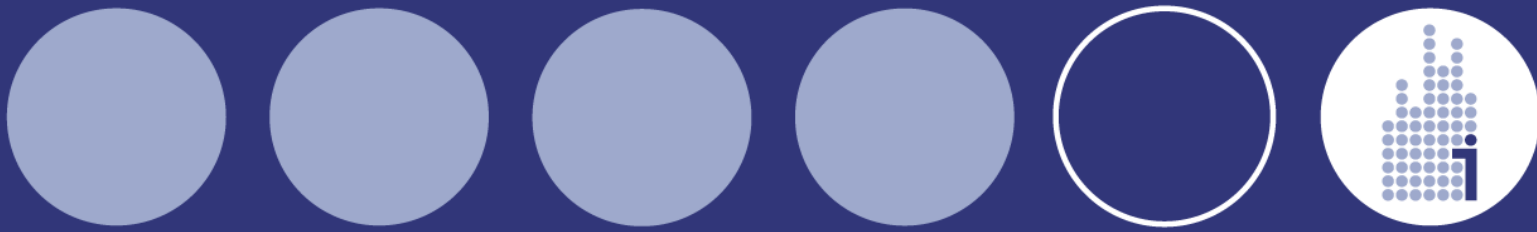
⁴³ Kempton, J. (2002) [Migrants in the UK: their characteristics and labour market outcomes and impacts](#), RDS Occasional Paper No. 82, Home Office 2002; Kyambi, S. (2005) *Beyond Black and White: Mapping new immigrant communities*, IPPR

⁴⁴ DWP (2003) *Working to rebuild lives. A preliminary report towards a refugee employment strategy*

⁴⁵ Bloch, A. (2002) [Refugees' opportunities and barriers in employment and training](#), Department for Work and Pensions Research Report 179

⁴⁶ Bloch, A. (2004) [Making it Work: refugee employment in the UK](#), Institute for Public Policy Research, Asylum and Migration Working Paper 2

⁴⁷ Greater London Authority (2005) *Country of birth and labour market outcomes in London: an analysis of labour force survey and Census data and 2005 briefing at* <http://www.london.gov.uk/gla/publications/factsandfigures/dmagg-briefing-index.pdf>



underemployment is high. However, in the absence of the kind of information that can identify refugees as a generic category within employment studies, a more detailed picture of differential experiences can only be gleaned through the smaller-scale qualitative studies, as discussed below.

Skills-focused research

Evidence of refugee underemployment emerges from the largest ever skills audit of this sector, conducted by the Home Office in 2002/3.⁴⁸ The responses reflected the largest refugee groups of the time – Iraq, Zimbabwe, and Somalia. Before leaving their country of origin, two-thirds of respondents were working, one in ten were students and under 5% were unemployed. Almost half had ten years or more of education and over 40% held qualifications before arriving in the UK. Three-quarters of respondents could read and write fluently or fairly well in their main language. Around a third rated their English language skills as either fluent or fairly good.

Within these headline figures were significant variations according to country of origin and gender with Zimbabweans tending to be more highly educated than Iraqis but with lower levels of employment before leaving their country, and Somali men far more likely than women to have worked in their country of origin. Elsewhere, a smaller audit carried out in Scotland⁴⁹ of 523 refugees and asylum seekers in Glasgow and Edinburgh found that they were, for the most part, well qualified and possessed a broad range of technical and professional skills.

Numerous small-scale studies of refugee skills exist, usually undertaken to help provide tailored local support. NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, has developed a skills audit methodology for use with refugees and asylum seekers.⁵⁰ Other research has explored the situation of refugees from a particular country of origin.⁵¹ These projects concur with the larger surveys in that they

identify differences based on each person's educational and work circumstances in countries of origin, and their experiences of flight and asylum.

Much refugee employment research has sought to identify barriers and how to overcome them, and hence has increasingly become based around employment sectors. The numbers included within sector-specific databases provides some indication of unlocked potential, for example in 2006, the British Medical Association Refugee Doctor Database contained 1087 registered doctors. Nearly 100 refugee dentists and over 250 refugee nurses were on other specialist databases.⁵² Elsewhere, the Refugee Teachers Task Force has estimated that the number of refugee teachers in England may be upwards of 1500.⁵³

5. Barriers to employment and improving access

A consensus of key findings shows that:

- labour market participation is low, and significantly lower than for other BME groups, although informal labour market participation is believed to be higher
- many refugees with higher skills and/or professional qualifications are only able to find work at levels below their skills and are therefore underemployed
- wages and conditions for those who do find work are also poorer
- literacy and formal education are mixed with both the highly skilled and very poorly skilled
- jobs found in the UK do not always match skills and qualifications
- there is some clustering around ethnic 'enclaves' in formal and informal economy activity
- barriers and obstacles have proved to be extensive and enduring

There are a whole range of barriers to employment and two studies have developed a typology of four broad groupings: personal, social

⁴⁸ Kirk, R. (2004) [Skills Audit of Refugees](#). Home Office Online Report 37/04

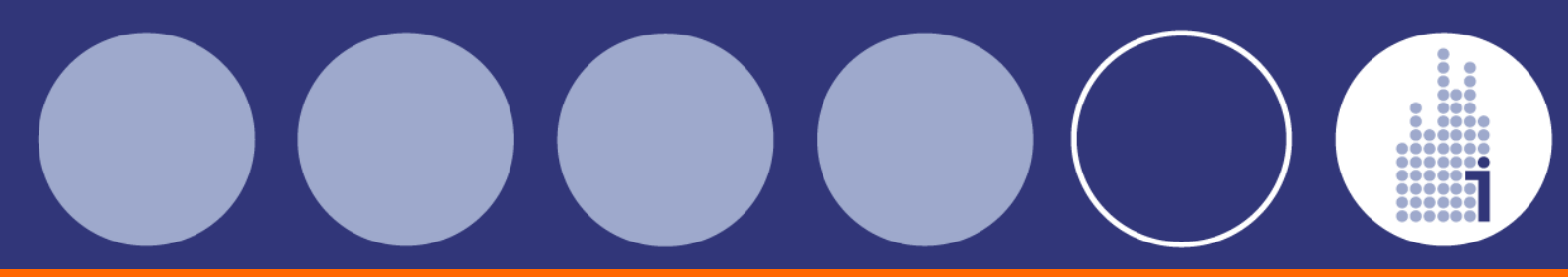
⁴⁹ Charlaff, L., Ibrani, K., Lowe, M., Marsden, R. and Turney, L. (2004). [Refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland: A skills and aspirations audit](#). Scottish Executive and Scottish Refugee Council

⁵⁰ See the [NIACE refugee skills audit](#) webpage

⁵¹ See for example, Bloch, A. & Atfield, G. (2002) *The Professional Capacity of Nationals from the Somali Regions in Britain*. London: Refugee Action and IOM

⁵² NRIF Employment and Training Subgroup (2006) [Rebuilding Lives - Groundwork: Progress report on refugee employment](#). Home Office and Employability Forum

⁵³ Employability Forum (2006) *Draft report to DfES*, Refugee Teachers Task Force



and economic issues; knowledge, information and advice; qualifications and credentials; and structural issues.⁵⁴

However, studies have suggested that refugees have higher levels of education and skills than the UK average, are highly motivated, and that the majority are young males of working age. Thus it is likely that, along with other categories of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers have much to offer their host country if initial obstacles can be overcome.

Obstacles have been found to vary among different categories of refugees. For example, refugee women have been found to suffer greater work exclusion upon entering the UK as dependents on their husband's asylum claim. Among the specific reasons for this are the loss of informal support systems such as the wider family,⁵⁵ and less contact with statutory agencies than men.⁵⁶ Conversely, for those that are more settled and/or looking for less skilled work, 'female' skills or segregated job types may find more success in an economy dominated by the service sector.⁵⁷

The lack of adequate English language skills has been found to be the single most serious obstacle to obtaining employment.⁵⁸ As with migrants in

the UK generally,⁵⁹ research suggests that English language proficiency is the factor most positively associated with labour market participation. Furthermore, those with poor knowledge of English that do find work are generally confined to low-skilled work as a result. DWP research found that English language training was felt by asylum seekers and refugees surveyed to be the most appropriate help to gaining the employment they wanted.⁶⁰

However, simply identifying English language proficiency as a problem is not enough. There is evidence that the kind of courses and training on offer have been inadequate.⁶¹ Moreover the proposal to withdraw the teaching of English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) to asylum seekers until they receive a positive decision suggested that the importance of language for cohesion and integration had not been fully accepted. As a result of such criticisms the proposal has since been subjected to further consultation.⁶²

Likewise, means and strategies for finding employment differ according to a number of factors including length of residence, proficiency in English and experiences or trust of mainstream agencies. Mainstream employment services are more likely to be used by those that have been in the country for a longer period and have a better command of English. However, the take-up and knowledge of these services still remains low. For example, Shiferaw and Hagos found that only 11% of those interviewed had used their Jobcentre to find a job, and the same number had accessed refugee agency career advisory services.⁶³ Bloch found that just under half of those who were working or looking for work had heard of

⁵⁴ From **Schreiber, S.** (2006) *LORECA Mapping Exercise. Examining the numbers, locations and employment, training and enterprise needs of London's refugee and asylum seeker communities*. LORECA; following **Archer, L., Hollingworth, S. and Maylor, U.** (2005) *Challenging Barriers to Employment for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in London*. University of Sussex

⁵⁵ **Dumper, H.** (2002) *Missed opportunities. A skills audit of refugee women in London from the teaching, nursing and medical professions* Mayor of London in association with Refugee Women's Association. Also see <http://www.refugeewomen.org.uk/>

⁵⁶ **Bloch, A.** (2002), *Refugees' opportunities and barriers in employment and training*. Department for Work and Pensions Research Report 179.

⁵⁷ ⁵⁷ **Rutter, J. with Cooley, L., Reynolds, S. and Sheldon, R.** (2007), *From Refugee to Citizen: 'Standing On My Own Two Feet'. A research report on integration, 'Britishness' and citizenship*. Metropolitan Support Trust and IPPR

⁵⁸ **Schellekens, P.** (2001) *English Language as a Barrier to Employment, Education and Training*, DfEE; **Barer, R.** (1999) *Refugee skills-net: the employment and training of skilled and qualified refugees*, Peabody Trust/London Research Centre; (2001), DfEE; **Shiferaw, D and Hagos, H.** (2002) *Refugees and progression routes to employment*, Refugee Council and PLRTEN; **Bloch, A.** (2002), *Refugees' opportunities and barriers in employment and training*, Department for Work and Pensions Research Report 179

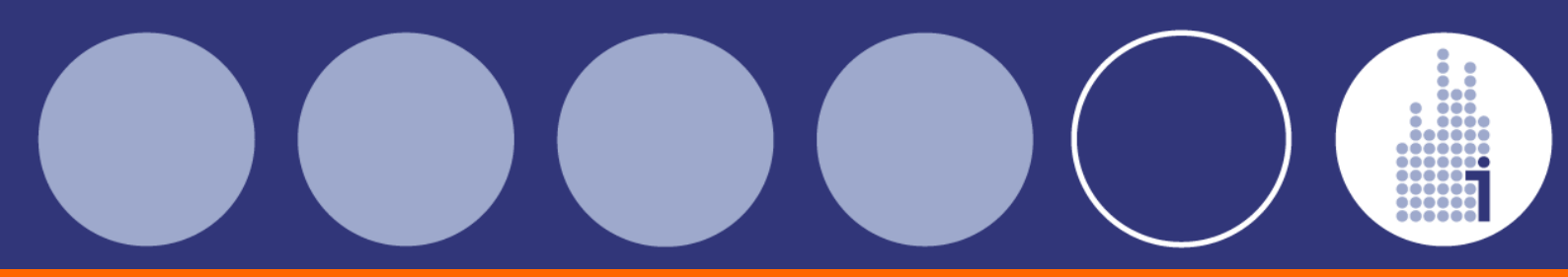
⁵⁹ See for example, **Haque, R.** (2002) *Migrants in the UK: A Descriptive Analysis of their Characteristics and Labour Market Performance*, DWP

⁶⁰ **Bloch, A.** (2002)

⁶¹ **Schellekens, P.** (2001) *English Language as a Barrier to Employment, Education and Training*, DfEE; **Griffiths, D.** (2003) *English language training for refugees in London and the regions*, Home Office Online Report 14/03; **NIACE** (2006) *'More than a language...' Final report of the NIACE Committee of Inquiry on English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)*, NIACE

⁶² With a concession for eligibility for both FE and ESOL if the asylum claim or appeal has not been decided after six months; or the person has been refused asylum but is unable to their country of origin and are receiving Section 4 support. See *Refugee Council ESOL and FE Briefing (2007)*. On the consultation see <http://www.esolconsultation.org.uk/>

⁶³ **Shiferaw, D and Hagos, H.** (2002) *Refugees and progression routes to employment*, Refugee Council and PLRTEN.



schemes run by Jobcentre Plus. Of the schemes offered, New Deal was the most widely known.⁶⁴

Informal personal contact is reported as the most common means of job seeking and gaining advice on employment, although personal contacts are more likely to be made through friends rather than kinship networks, which were commonly used in countries of origin.⁶⁵ RCOs or specialist agencies are also preferred, although there are concerns about the capacity of smaller RCOs in this area.⁶⁶

Methods of job-seeking may also vary according to country of origin. For example, Bloch (2002) found that Somalis were found to use Jobcentres the most, but were less likely to have asked friends about employment opportunities.⁶⁷ These findings suggest a significant challenge is faced by voluntary and statutory agencies in making their services accessible to a diverse refugee and asylum-seeking population.

Finally, barriers are experienced differentially by respondents at different stages of settlement in the UK. Whilst lack of familiarity with the UK system was mentioned by many of those who had been in the UK for less than five years, this barrier was perceived to be less of a problem by those who had been resident in the UK for longer. For this group, racial discrimination was perceived to be more of a barrier to participation in the labour market.⁶⁸

Until the other recognised obstacles identified above are removed by improved policy and job preparation services, there is insufficient evidence to judge whether employers may be discriminating against refugees on racial grounds. Most studies based on qualitative interviews with refugees, however, reflect a perception of racial prejudice and recent research is increasingly

supporting that case.⁶⁹ Employers on the other hand, identify key problems as confusing permission to work documentation, the negative public image of refugees, and the lack of familiarity and comparability of qualifications and work experience.⁷⁰ These may be exacerbated by the removal of indefinite leave to remain and its replacement with temporary leave, as employers may seek employees elsewhere rather than risk penalties under Government initiatives to prevent illegal working.⁷¹ The deterrent asylum regime and the climate within which migration is discussed, as well as public confusion between asylum seekers, refugees and economic migrants, does not facilitate refugee employment.

6. Contacts

The following are mainly *national* organisations whose work relates to employment issues. At the end you will find a list of Strategic Migration Partnerships, which act as umbrella bodies for all organisations and activities relating to refugees and asylum seekers on a *regional* level.

[Africa Educational Trust](#)

Support for students and refugees of African descent including the African Refugee Women's Project, and advice on how the law affects refugees and asylum seekers' education and training entitlements. AET also works with other organisations to represent the views and concerns of refugees and asylum seekers concerning education, training and employment.

[Asset UK](#)

Asset UK (Asylum Seekers' Skills, Empowerment & Training) was a multi-partner project led by the Refugee Council which closed in 2005. Aimed at assisting asylum seekers and staff working with them in main dispersal areas, the website still has various relevant publications available.

⁶⁴ Bloch, A. (2002), [Refugees' opportunities and barriers in employment and training](#). Department for Work and Pensions Research Report 179.

⁶⁵ Shiferaw, D and Hagos, H. (2002); Bloch, A. (2002).

⁶⁶ Schreiber, S. (2006) [LORECA Mapping Exercise. Examining the numbers, locations and employment, training and enterprise needs of London's refugee and asylum seeker communities](#), LORECA; Garneledin-Ashami, M., Cooper, L. and Knight, B. (2002), [Refugee Settlement: Can communities cope?](#), CES; Griffiths, D., Sigona, N. and Zetter, R. (2005) *Refugee Community Organisations and Dispersal: Networks, resources and social capital*, Policy Press

⁶⁷ Bloch, A. (2002)

⁶⁸ Bloch, A. (2002).

⁶⁹ See most recently Rutter, J. et al (2007); Dhudwar, A. (2006) *Refugee perceptions and experiences of discrimination in the labour market*. Working Lives Research Institute, London Metropolitan University

⁷⁰ Hurstfield, J., Pearson, R., Hooker, H., Ritchie, H. and Sinclair, A. (2004), [Employing Refugees: Some Organisations' Experiences](#), Institute of Employment Studies/Employability Forum. See also <http://www.employabilityforum.co.uk/> and <http://www.niace.org.uk/research/asr/projects/progress-gb.htm>

⁷¹ LORECA (2006) *Impact of Temporary Leave to Remain on Refugee Employment Prospects*. LORECA



British Dental Association

The BDA runs a number of projects aimed at assisting refugee dentists, including the Refugee Dentist Steering Group and the Refugee Dentist database, listing refugee dentists in the UK. Both the latter projects are run jointly with the Refugee Council.

British Medical Association (BMA)

Hosts a database of refugee doctors as well as regular briefings and newsletters and a list of useful links for refugee doctors.

Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA)

CARA aims to assist university teachers or researchers who have lost their jobs as a result of political, racial or religious discrimination and have become refugees in the UK.

Department of Health

The [ROSE](#) website is an NHS-led project aimed at helping refugee health professionals in the UK to establish a career. In London the [Building Bridges](#) partnership has taken forward this work.

EASI

Empowering Asylum Seekers to Integrate (EASI) was a Development Partnership within the EQUAL programme (see below) which worked closely with PRESTO. It consisted of fourteen organizations and aimed to tackle discrimination in the labour market. Its website gives access to a number of relevant products including an education, employment and training guide for refugees and asylum seekers.

European Council on Refugees and Exile

The ECRE is a Pan-European network of refugee NGOs which carries out policy work and research on refugee issues in Europe, including employment.

Education Action International

Specialized support for asylum seekers and refugees on education and employment in the UK through their Refugee Education and Training Advisory Service (RETAS), including an online series of FAQs and practical guides to a range of sub-topics.

Employability Forum

Independent organization which works with the voluntary sector, employers and government in order to promote 'the employment of refugees

and integration of migration workers in the UK'. It provides practical help through events and projects and seeks to influence government policy, where necessary, to dismantle obstacles to employment.

EQUAL

A programme supported by the European Social Fund aimed at combating discrimination and inequality in the labour market, the final phase of which ran from 2004 to 2007. Its work was grounded in the four pillars of the European Employment Strategy, one of which covered the specific needs of asylum seekers. EQUAL operated by bringing key partners in a geographical area together in Development Partnerships (DPs). There were four DPs focused mainly on refugees, with one focussing on asylum seekers.

General Medical Council

The GMC help refugee doctors to requalify: They waive the £145 fee for refugee doctors to sit part one of the Professional Linguistics Assessment Board test, as well as other discounts and payment facilities.

London Refugee Economic Action

Now part of the London Development Agency's Equality and Diversity Team, LORECA works to improve refugee employment, training and enterprise within the context of the economic regeneration of London. LORECA serves as the link body on employment matters to the Mayor's Board for Refugee Integration in London. The website includes a directory of services for refugees and asylum seekers in London, a library of refugee employment resources, a mapping exercise of London's refugee population, and briefings on refugee employment issues.

National Institute for Adult Continuing Education

NIACE aims to promote the study and general advancement of adult continuing education. It has conducted research on refugees and asylum seekers and developed a number of projects relating to the education and employment of this group.

National Academic Recognition Information Centre for the United Kingdom

NARIC advises on how overseas academic qualifications relate to UK qualifications. The service covers a wide range of countries, and can



advise on the standing of international qualifications with UK professional bodies.

[Presto Legacy Website](#)

As one of EQUAL's Development Partnerships the Partnership for Refugee Employment through Support, Training and Online Learning (PRESTO) brought together 11 organisations between 2004 and 2007 to test new models to improve the employment prospects of refugee professionals in the health, education, engineering and enterprise. To ensure the learning from the project is not lost, PRESTO has developed the Presto Legacy Website, divided into Refugee Case Studies, Partnership Lessons, Policy Papers, and Products Produced. Of particular relevance is their [Advice Guide for Advisors](#), and the 12 final [partnership evaluation briefings](#)

[ProgressGB](#)

The Progress GB Development Partnership was again funded by EQUAL and consisted of eleven organisations across seven regions, led by NIACE (see above), who worked together between 2004 and 2007 to 'address barriers to appropriate employment for refugees and migrants.' The legacy website contains a series of reports that came out of their work, including the final report 'Routes to Integration and Inclusion: New Approaches to Enable Refugee and Migrant Workers to Progress in the Labour Market',

[Refugee Action](#)

An independent national charity that provides employment and training advice as part of its services, including the Horizons volunteer project, which seeks to match employers' needs and refugee skills.

[Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit](#)

As part of the Department of Applied Social Sciences at London Metropolitan University, RAGU supports refugees with high level education or professional qualifications to move into employment and education through individual guidance, work placements, specialist training and short courses. They also publish their own research and guides on education and employment for refugees and asylum seekers.

[Refugee Council](#)

The Refugee Council's Learning Integration Unit (LIU) offers learning, development and employment opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers, including work-related training

and support, and study grants. They also offer [information](#) on relating to training, education and employment entitlements for refugees and asylum seekers.

[Refugee Engineers Database](#)

This Database is an online resource, for professional refugees who have engineering qualifications and experience and are looking for work in their field of expertise in the UK. The database works like an employment agency but also offers extra support to help engineers with CVs, interview techniques and work placements as well as the more traditional job searches.

[Refugees into Teaching](#)

Refugee Council site with project details, policy and information briefings etc.

[Scottish Refugee Council](#)

Advice, information and assistance for asylum seekers and refugees in Scotland. Their education and employment section provides details of a variety of current employment and training related projects, including work experience for asylum seekers and a refugee doctors' database. It also links to the main findings of a 2004 skills audit of refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland.

[Welsh Refugee Council](#)

Performs a similar function to the Scottish Refugee Council. Their site contains a research report on the Refugee Skills Audit carried out by the Welsh Refugee Council under the auspices of the EQUAL programme.

[Strategic Migration Partnerships](#)

East of England

[EERA Strategic Migration Partnership](#)

East Midlands

[East Midlands Strategic Migration Partnership](#)

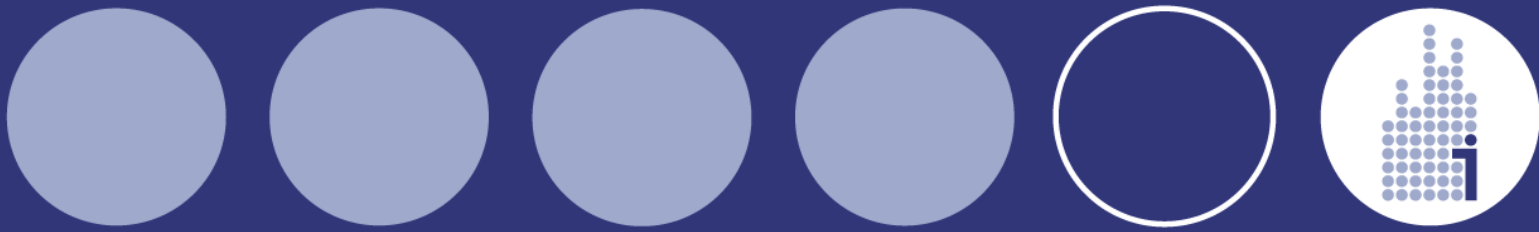
London

(pending launch of London Strategic Migration Partnership end 2008)

[Board for Refugee Integration in London](#)

North East

[North East Strategic Migration Partnership](#)



North West Regional Strategic Migration Partnership

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Scotland

[COSLA Strategic Migration Partnership \(CSMP\)](#)

South East of England

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South West

[South West Region Strategic Migration Partnership](#)

Wales

[Wales Strategic Migration Partnership](#)

West Midlands

[West Midlands Strategic Migration Partnership](#)

Yorkshire and Humberside

[Yorkshire & Humberside Regional Migration Partnership](#)

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