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Attitudes to employment of professionally-qualified refugees in the UK

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the attitudes to work and experiences seeking employment of professionally-qualified refugees enrolled on a course to enhance their employability skills in Leeds, UK. The results are analysed within the framework of conceptual models describing the transition of refugees into employment (which are essentially linear) and those which categorise refugees according to their resettlement styles based on their social features and the host society's response. Our data reinforce that these people are (initially at least) highly motivated to work, strongly identify with their profession and suffer considerable loss of self esteem as they are unable to secure appropriate employment. Attitudes to securing employment were often related to their length of time in the UK. Recent arrivals were more positive about returning to their profession, even if this meant retraining, developing skills and time spent in alternative employment. Many of those here for longer were resigned to retraining, and the worst cases felt despair and feelings of betrayal. Our work showed many had poor job search strategies and a lack of knowledge of the culture and norms of their chosen profession. We argue that the generic support of statutory employment services or the voluntary sector is inappropriate and that there is a role for professional bodies to be more active in their engagement with these groups of people. The results suggest that conceptual models need to be more nuanced to capture the experiences of these refugees: attitudes to work can cycle from optimism to disillusionment, so a linear model will not capture the full complexity, and we also found evidence of shifting among categories of resettlement styles.

INTRODUCTION

Gaining employment is recognised as critical to the effective integration of refugees, both for individual well-being and livelihood, and for wider benefits to receiving communities and the economy (e.g. Bloch, 2002, 2004; Feeney, 2000; Beiser and Hou, 2001; Phillimore and Goodson, 2006; Fozdar, 2009). While employment is central to UK government policy on integration, there are conflicting policies which restrict labour market access (Bloch, 2007), adding to the barriers to employment faced by refugees. These have been characterised as either internal - a lack of English language proficiency, not being accustomed to the UK competitive job search culture and lacking 'soft skills' such as interpersonal, teamwork and communication skills, or external - those outside the refugees' influence including issues around status and legal recognition, licensing and registration requirements of certain professions, a lack of accessible information and discrimination and racism (Shiferaw and Hagos, 2002).

There are no officially collated statistics on refugee unemployment, but evidence suggests it is far above the national average for any disadvantaged group in the UK. Shiferaw and Hagos (2002) found over 60% unemployment amongst their refugee respondents while Bloch (2002) found that only 29% of her respondents were working at the time of the study. For those refugees who are working their terms and conditions of employment are often poor and notably worse than that experienced by other ethnic minority people. They are substantially more likely to be in temporary posts, without holiday pay and without access to training as well as being significantly less well paid. Bloch (2002) noted that refugees' hourly earnings were on average 79% of those of other ethnic minority people.

In this article we will explore in particular the experiences of highly qualified (that is, at university undergraduate level or above), professional refugees in accessing the labour market. It is difficult to be precise about the numbers of individuals within the wider refugee population to which our findings are applicable, since information on qualifications is not collated by the immigration services. Nor are any results likely to be fixed, as the influx of refugees and their characteristics will vary with the nature and location of conflicts. Nevertheless, Bloch (2002) found that up to 56% of refugees aged 18 or over have a qualification on arrival (of which 23% had a degree or higher) and a further 20% had gained a qualification since arriving in the UK. In a survey of over 1000 refugees, Kirk (2004:15) described 15% as being in 'professional occupations' before coming to the UK, and a further 22% as 'managers and senior officials'. It is worth noting however that while refugees may have qualifications prior to entry, these may not be recognised in the UK or some may be unable to produce documentary evidence of the fact, adding to the barriers they face (Bloch, 2004; Stevenson and Willott, 2005; Stevenson and Willott, 2008).

Within the range of issues faced by refugees in adjusting to their new circumstances and integrating into society, there are some which are particularly relevant to those formerly in professional occupations. These individuals will have been in highly-paid and high-status jobs, and failure to secure employment commensurate with their skills is associated with loss of self-esteem and downward professional mobility (Mesthenos and Ioannidi, 2002). These are people for whom "... their profession or occupation tends to be the main axis of identity and abandoning it would thus involve not only a loss of income and status but also a loss of identity" (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2003). Furthermore, re-entering their profession (if at all) can involve a long process (Morrice, 2009), and "qualified professionals with managerial and administrative backgrounds are the most disadvantaged group in terms of routes to employment. They follow longer routes of postgraduate education, volunteering and so on, yet most are unable to find suitable employment" (Shiferaw and Hagos, 2002:9). These findings are, in the main, reflected in the results from the small number of UK projects supporting 'professional' or highly qualified refugees to access employment such as the Refugees into Teaching project run by the Refugee Council¹, the work of the Refugee

Assessment and Guidance Unit (RAGU) at London Metropolitan University² and the work of the universities of Birmingham³ and Brighton and Sussex (REMAS HE)⁴.

A number of models have been developed which attempt to capture the routes into employment for refugees (summarised and developed by Shiferaw and Hagos, 2002). These are largely mechanistic, indicating the practical issues (e.g. support with housing or language training) and the agencies involved in the various stages. As the authors note, they can be dependent on the specific refugee population and current immigration and asylum policy. We will relate our findings to the transition model for refugee employment proposed by Marshall (1992), as this explicitly focuses on the psychological processes that refugees experience and we are interested in attitudes to employment and the effect that their experiences in trying to secure work has had on them. This model (Figure 1) proposes that following initial disorientation, and once basic needs such as housing are met, refugees are optimistic about their future prospects. However, disillusionment and depression follow when they are frustrated in attempts to secure work. A trigger such as the provision of new information can lead to an opportunity such as a training course or funding, and their subsequent feelings will depend on whether the outcome is appropriate employment or not.

Insert Figure 1 here

We are also attracted by the typology developed for the resettlement style of refugees in Australia developed by Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2003). This intuitive approach categorises resettlement styles as “active” or “passive”, further subdivided into “achievers” and “consumers”, and “endurers” and “victims” respectively. “Achievers” are usually professionals, seeing their profession as their main identity, and are oriented towards regaining their previous occupational and social status. “Consumers” are similarly pro-active, but tend to be more oriented towards their fellow community members, and wish to raise their status within the community through consumption and acquisition of status symbols. Conversely, “endurers” feel they have lost much through migration and are fatalistic, tending to retreat from society into small support networks and channelling their energies into their children whom they hope will have a better life. Even more extreme are the “victims”; they feel they have no control over their circumstances and have given up. This may be as much a consequence of the bureaucracy and disappointments of resettlement as the initial flight, and they are usually welfare dependant and suffer unresolved mental health problems. Being professionals, we would predict that the refugees with whom we worked would display the characteristics of the “achiever” group.

METHODOLOGY

Data presented here were collected during projects⁵ based in Leeds, the largest city in the Yorkshire and the Humber region of the UK, which aimed to research and address the barriers faced by excluded groups, including refugees, in accessing higher education and employment. The region receives the largest number of dispersed asylum seekers of any in the UK, with Leeds receiving most, and approximately 4,000 refugees settle in the region each year (Westmorland, 2006). Asylum seekers are those persons who have lodged an asylum claim (in the UK with the UK Border Agency, part of the Home Office) and who are waiting for a decision on their claim. A person is only recognised as a refugee when their application for asylum has been granted, having met the refugee criteria set out in the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, namely “a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her

origin and is unwilling or... unable to return to it." (Convention of 1951, Article 1A (2)). Once refugee status has been granted individuals have full rights to undertake paid employment. This is not the case for asylum seekers.

Preliminary research (Stevenson and Willott, 2005) with unemployed professional and skilled refugees indicated that for the most qualified individuals with appropriate English language skills, designing courses to develop personal and employability skills would be of most benefit. Consequently two accredited, modular courses were developed by Leeds Metropolitan University, covering the three stages of employability as defined by Hillage and Pollard (1999). That is, they were designed to equip the refugees with the requisite skills and attitudes to gain initial employment (including relevant work related and job search skills), the confidence and motivation to look for work, and appropriate personal skills and social competencies required to sustain employment (such as understanding rights and entitlements and the culture of working in the UK). Sessions on gaining initial employment covered defining employability, exploring and examining personal skills and qualities, and identifying barriers to personal development and employment. Practical support included gathering information on occupational prospects and on the local and regional labour market, accessing relevant websites, building CVs, analysing job advertisements and developing interview skills. Sessions on maintaining employment covered understanding the attributes and skills valued by employers and relevant current legislation, identifying workplace issues which may impact on equal opportunity and understanding the UK workplace culture. Information on moving into new employment was threaded throughout these other sessions to support those refugees currently under-employed.

Courses were delivered in two phases: The first comprised 31 refugees from a total of 18 countries (Cameroon, Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Ethiopia, Somalia, Kuwait, Burundi, Bhutan, Congo, Nepal, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Eritrea and China), with 25 subsequently completing training. On the second there were 19 refugees (plus 6 other migrants) from 14 countries (Cameroon, Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Ethiopia, Somalia, Kuwait, Chad, Kenya, Kosovo and Sudan),. The refugees ranged in age from 25 to 54 with the majority (37) aged between 30 and 45. Most were qualified professionals, with many having postgraduate qualifications, who were currently unemployed or working in low-paid unskilled jobs such as factory or care workers, but wished to resume work within their profession or in similar employment. All of them spoke intermediate to advanced level English though not all had English language qualifications.

We conducted research with all those recruited to the course who had refugee status and were professionally qualified, to explore further their experiences in accessing employment and their feelings about their personal circumstances. All of those interviewed had been in the UK for over a year. Of the 50 refugees interviewed, six had been in the UK for less than two years, seventeen for between 2 and 3 years, fourteen between 3 and 4 years, six between 4 and 5 years and seven for five years or more.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all research participants and they also completed detailed questionnaires asking them to reflect on their engagement in employment, education and community activities, their attitudes and aspirations towards training and employment and their perceived and actual barriers to accessing them. The research was conducted in English throughout. When signing ethics consent forms, most stated that they were happy to be named and quoted in the research, but we have chosen to anonymise reports, noting only the gender and previous occupation of participants.

ATTITUDE TOWARDS EMPLOYMENT

The majority of the refugees who were interviewed (44 out of 50) were professionally qualified (including doctors, dentists, teachers, accountants, engineers, nurses, solicitors and journalists). Many had achieved very high status within their profession (headteacher, head of accounting, consultant surgeon). By enrolling on the course, they could be described as “active” in the typology of Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2003), and their strong professional orientation (rather than pursuit of income per se) resonated with the “achiever” rather than “consumer” categories. All spoke about the significance their previous high-level, high status (and usually highly paid) employment had had for them. They frequently used terms such as “satisfaction”, “enjoyment”, “being trusted”, “confidence”, “responsibility”, “being able to help”, “contributing to my family and myself and to my community” and “happiness”. However, these positive reflections contrasted sharply with how these same professionally qualified refugees felt when unable to get similar employment in the UK. Almost all were currently unemployed. Those who were employed were working in low paid, low skilled employment with little or no connection to their previous employment such as shelf stacker, fruit picker, or care worker.

Shiferaw and Hagos (2002 :15) highlight the psychology of being a refugee since “... refugees may have experienced loss, separation and human rights abuse. Most have lost social status and a sense of service to their community. Unlike their migrant counterparts who are pulled by opportunities, refugees are pushed by circumstance”. This is reflected in our findings. All bar one, who was happy working part time, spoke of how unhappy they felt at either being unemployed or working in a job unrelated to their profession.

Unemployment is a nightmare no-one would certainly want to taste... being on state benefits is nothing compared to what one would feel like when offering its service to an employer and being paid...not having a job for such a lengthy period of time is just starting to work negatively in my mind because I am feeling so much under pressure in myself and people who are dear to me (male financial consultant)

I feel very low and depressed. Although I am working at the moment I am doing this job just because I don't want to stay at home. I have been busy all my life studying or working and I really enjoy being useful for my family and society, but when you have a lot of knowledge and experience that you cannot use you feel upset' (male accountant)

Some described the boredom of unemployment while others talked about their intense dislike of having to rely on state handouts and benefits, and their inability to contribute something to the country that has given them asylum:

I had a very busy career before coming to the UK... suddenly, after arriving in the UK I found myself unemployed, prohibited of work, with more free time than I can tolerate. It is stressing to feel unable to do something you love and you know that you are good at (male dentist)

The most important thing is to just work. What is important isn't the choice of job and what you choose. It's the principle of working, of being able to contribute to the country, to support yourself. It's so humiliating. People think you're just happy to have money from the government and not work. But it's not so. You need to contribute something. You want to pay back somehow. We aren't even allowed to do unpaid jobs as asylum seekers. I felt reduced to nothing (female doctor)

The refugees talked at greatest length about the impact unemployment had on their self-esteem. The former very high status of these professional refugees means that their feelings about the gap between their previous and their current employment circumstances are,

probably, more profound and painful than those experienced by other refugees. They frequently used words such as “ashamed”, “depressed”, and “useless” to describe themselves. They had (or felt they had) lost status in their own eyes and those of their families; they missed the self-esteem that came from being successfully professionally employed and the confidence they had felt at working in an environment they were trained and skilled to work in. They also felt aggrieved that, despite lengthy post graduate training and years of work experience, they now had to start climbing the professional ladder from the bottom.

I am not working at the moment and I feel very sad because I used to work since I graduated from university and I have got a lot of experience in my profession. The bad thing about being unemployed is losing confidence and self-esteem as well as losing the experience I got through my previous work life (female doctor)

I feel somehow depressed at being unemployed, and that my abilities are being lost in doing nothing. Sometimes I feel positive and optimistic that all I need is patience to get the good chance. I come from a culture where getting money for doing nothing is shameful and I have been working hard all my life, now I've got stuck in a situation where I am treated as if useless and all the work I have done is worthless (female doctor).

LOOKING FOR WORK

Our research identifies that the experiences of professional refugees are significantly more complicated than the linear progression of Marshall's diagram appears to show. Not only, as Hagos and Shiferaw also identify (2002), is there no common pathway for refugees, but the refugees had veered from optimism to disillusionment and back again many times in their pursuit of employment. In addition, while the refugees involved in our study were, at the point of interview, either optimistic or disillusioned, there were significantly different categories of optimists: those prepared to work in any job; those determined to find work in their original profession; and those resigned to re-training or using their skills in a transferable manner.

Those prepared to work in any job

This was the smallest group of refugees interviewed as part of the research and comprised those refugees who had been in the UK for the shortest amount of time, were younger or had not reached particularly high levels in their professional field. Others had had very traumatic experiences leading up to fleeing their home countries and were keen to just get settled and safe, improve their English language skills, establish themselves and their families in the community and settle children into school etc.

I'll do anything at the moment. Practise, practise, practise. I can't do anything until I can speak English. I'll take any job (female teacher)

These refugees presented as optimistic, determined and prepared to access any opportunity that was presented to them. They used all job search mediums and were prepared to take low-skilled and low-paid employment. They also felt that they could gain requisite skills to re-establish future careers via employment of any sort so did not need to hold out for comparable professional employment.

Contact with English people is very important for me. I will benefit a lot from speaking and communicating with other people. I need to get my English improved and get a secure job. I'm a decorator's labourer at the moment but I want a better, secure job (male teacher)

I want to improve my language and communication skills before I work. Learning to communicate with your patients is almost more important than knowing how to treat them. I'll work doing anything now or volunteering to improve my communication skills ready for going back into medicine (male doctor)

This group were most interested in understanding where to look for work, their rights and entitlements and developing practical skills such as writing CVs and application forms.

Those determined to find work in their original profession

This group also comprised those who had been in the UK for a relatively short amount of time but who were determined to work in their chosen profession despite an awareness of the significant barriers they would need to overcome. This included those qualified as doctors or accountants and who felt that they did not have transferrable skills to work in other fields. They had generally worked in a particular field or specialism for many years and had reached a high level within their profession.

This group were somewhat less optimistic, since they were aware of the significant barriers they would need to overcome to practice in their fields. They understood where to look for jobs in their relevant field (practitioner journals, specialist websites) but needed practical support: English language skills, passing their IELTS at a high level, financial support and advice and UK work experience and references.

I know what I need to do, where I need to train, how much it will cost me. I just need to get there now (male doctor)

I know what need to be done but I cannot do it; I must get a driving licence but I cannot afford the expenses; I must get membership of the IFA but I get lost every time I try to get through the mountains of requirements; I need to meet archaeologists but I don't know how to make myself interesting for them... it's a vicious circle, a big conundrum. Maybe the way to do it is little by little and have the patience of a saint (male archaeologist)

I have been working for a distribution electrical company for nearly 2 ½ years... I feel relax during working there because the atmosphere is quite good compared to some other factories... having said that, this is not a job I would like to work forever because it is not related to medicine at all and I hope to be able to cross the barrier and achieve my ambition which is working as a doctor in the UK (male doctor)

Those resigned to re-training or using their transferrable skills

This third group of 'optimists' comprised those refugees who, after longer in the UK, had accepted that the process of gaining employment in their profession was going to be too difficult or costly (at least in the short to medium term). This group included chemical and mechanical engineers, teachers and those who had qualified to practice law based on

French civil law system, such as that practised in the Republic of Congo and had made the decision (albeit sometimes with resignation) to gain alternative employment using their transferrable skills. Already employed (in low paid, low skilled jobs) they were now looking for opportunities to re-train or gain different employment. This group also included those who considered themselves as 'professional' (journalist, lecturer) but who did not have a professional qualification as well as those who were still hoping to work in their original profession but at some point in the future:

I am optimistic and always look forward and I try to do everything possible to achieve my dream and aim to work in my job. I started working for any work equivalent to my qualifications and experience (male mechanical engineer)

These refugees were aware of the range of job search mediums open to them (Job Centre, internet, recruitment agencies, job placement schemes etc.) and most had used all or nearly all of these in their search for work. They were also most likely to have undertaken some form of voluntary work- although without exception this had been with, or arranged by, organisations providing support for refugees or asylum seekers. Most had found volunteering extremely useful:

I gained experience to distinguish between the boss and the workers, how to communicate with clients in the workplace and outside the workplace and also how to behave myself in the good manner in the workplace (female interpreter)

I got self-satisfaction, a start point to gain experience how to deal with people in the UK, improvements in my English practice, meet new people and a good reference in case I find a job (male dentist)

However, this group were finding it difficult to move beyond the refugee-based networks they had developed and had become stuck in their attempts to access skilled or professional employment. They were unfocussed in their job search, random in their applications and had practical difficulties with developing CVs, writing application forms, particularly personal statements and in preparing for interviews. They were also not strategic in their approach to looking for employment:

Sometimes I feel my personality is not enough to present in front of the interviewer, or maybe my knowledge is too low to answer the questions at the interview. Sometimes I think the experience and skills I have, I learnt back home... are not enough as a qualification to get my chosen profession (female interpreter)

I need to know myself, my skills and abilities... to know what I need, want. I also need to know where to look for a job, choose the right advertisements and be decisive (female accountant)

There arised a whole set of barriers I did not think of previously which are UK work experience, UK referees, professional qualification, fees for re-training, bad approach to interviews, lack of up to date industry IT practice...I had no idea about information on the UK job market because I just focused on jobs in financial services. Now I have to readjust and assess my qualities and skills in order to consider a new career if possible (male financial consultant).

This group were particularly interested in understanding occupational prospects and trends in the local and regional labour market and identifying their transferable skills and qualities.

The 'Disillusioned'

The final group comprised those refugees who had been in the UK longest and were deeply disillusioned by their negative experiences of finding work in their chosen field. Many had been unable to gain a high enough English language qualification (the health and medical professions almost universally require practitioners whose first language is not English - except those from the EU - to have passed the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) at level 7 or above) or could not afford the fees to pass the requisite qualifications. Some had taken the test several times but had been unable to move beyond a certain level. Others had tried unsuccessfully to get relevant work experience in their specific field or to get any form of useful UK reference.

This group also included those who had overcome these barriers but were still unable to gain employment: one doctor had had just one (unsuccessful) interview out of 200 applications.

I think most employers don't trust people coming from other countries. There is some patronising. They look down on you because your degree has another name or your training is done in a different hospital. Also not having worked here makes them uneasy, which is understandable somehow but there is an inconsistency in some things because now I can only work under supervision so if I am not good they would know immediately but nobody likes to take the chance (female doctor)

Out of all the refugees interviewed, this group had struggled most, and for longest with applying for work. Many expressed their bewilderment that, despite having taken the steps they had been advised to do to access their chosen profession they were still struggling.

I feel betrayed. I've done everything that was asked of me but I still can't get a job (male accountant)

I've completed over 50 applications and haven't even had one interview. They don't get back to you or tell you anything (male chemist)

This group did not seem as aware of the usefulness of voluntary work in gaining employment, had given less consideration to the UK job market and either did not understand or were resistant to 'marketing' themselves.

I found it strange answering things like: give examples of your team skills or communication skills. I did not understand. What's the point? A doctor is a doctor whatever...I've heard a lot of people saying things like: what are you giving to the job? Everybody tells me to prepare for such questions. That seems out of context, if you are to do a job good you are to work hard. That is all. (female doctor)

DISCUSSION

Our research with 50 refugees was designed to identify the experiences of skilled professionals in attempting to access work, barriers they have encountered and the consequences for their well-being and perception of their resettlement and integration. In theory, these are people well-placed to access employment opportunities. All research points out that English language is key to labour market participation (e.g. Bloch, 2004; 2007), and all our participants had the ability to participate in a university course. Their human capital is

high (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2007) and being professionals and taking an active approach to resettlement, they might naturally fall into the “achiever” type of Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2003). We will reflect on the models of refugee employment and resettlement in the light of our findings, and then go on to consider the implications for policy for the provision of employment support services.

Our results broadly support the notion of progression from optimism to disillusionment as time progresses apparent in the model of Marshall (Fig. 1; Marshall, 1992), but with some important nuances. Following the terminology of the Marshall’s model, our courses can be viewed as a “trigger” point, designed to provide the “opportunity” for improved employment prospects. However, from the responses we see that participants entered the scheme with emotional states which can include being highly optimistic, as well as the “disillusionment” assumed in the model. The responses of our participants also showed that the nature of individuals’ optimism regarding employment, as well as its level, varies with time. Some people were optimistic yet pragmatic they could not work in their chosen career until they had improved their English or gained further qualifications. Others were shifting expectations from employment in their original chosen career to other skilled employment. Furthermore, these stages had also occurred while (under)employed, not just before accessing employment, so progression through the stages is somewhat less linear than implied by Marshall, and there may be cycles of optimism and disillusionment, with triggers and opportunities occurring at different stages. The typology of Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2003) is persuasive, in that many were active “achievers” who identified with their profession and were motivated to regain their status. However, we saw many who had become, or were in the process of becoming, disillusioned – and in danger of moving into the passive “victim” category. Thus we would argue that the typology lacks a temporal component which explicitly recognises that individuals may move within categories, or that their location may depend upon when the snapshot was taken. A complete model would need to capture conceptually useful categories such as those developed by Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2003), and the temporal, fluctuating components central to that of Marshall (1992).

Refugees felt from their own experiences that the lack of UK work experience and employer references was a serious problem, but we also identified a severe (but not surprising) lack of awareness of work culture and the process of job applications in the UK. Through both lack of confidence, and personal and professional cultural norms, no refugee had ever sought feedback from an employer on their application, and why they had not been short-listed or appointed. They had great difficulty with application processes which required them to promote themselves or demonstrate their communication or teamwork skills, for example. There was a view that their qualifications were enough and “spoke for themselves”. The sense of bewilderment and betrayal portrayed in the comments by those we categorised as “disillusioned” in particular convey how these issues are contributing to a loss of well-being. These comments indicate some real issues with the way some refugees are approaching the employment and recruitment process. It may be that some of the perceived barriers described by refugees in this study and elsewhere (e.g. Bloch, 2007) are not the actual reasons individuals fail to gain employment. That is not to say there is no structural discrimination or discrimination by employers (Tilbury and Colic-Peisker, 2006) or an ethnic penalty faced by refugees (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2007), but that without feedback from employers to validate these impressions, individuals may not be taking the most appropriate action to remedy the situation.

Providing effective employment services for refugees is problematic, although this may in part be due to mismatched perceptions of what the function of such a service should be. Torezani, Fozdar and Colic-Peisker (2008) show how refugees may value the opportunity to develop social networks more than developing specific job search skills. The particular challenges faced by highly skilled, professional refugees in the UK have been highlighted by Bloch (2004, 2007), and there is a recognition that the statutory employment agencies such

as JobCentre Plus lack the specialist knowledge to enable refugees to take the steps necessary to recommence their chosen profession (DWP, 2005; Employability Forum, 2006). The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) refugee employment strategy (2005) acknowledged that:

... refugees who have worked at a professional or technical level before coming to the UK may want support over and above that available through Jobcentre Plus in order to resume their careers. Jobcentre Plus does not have the expertise to deliver that degree of specialist help ...but the voluntary sector is well placed to work with these groups and have already made substantial developments. Jobcentre Plus's Refugee Operational Framework will advise staff about sources of specialist support across GB in the voluntary sector and elsewhere for refugee professionals (DWP, 2005:23).

While this recognised the problem, we question the apparent reliance on the voluntary and community sector because while organisations are both active and passionate in their support for refugees, they lack expertise in training, advice and guidance in highly professional and specialised employment sectors such as the health service, engineering or accountancy. Refugee support organisations, who engage with and have the trust of their clients, need the public and private sector to contribute funding and specialist expertise to provide a full service to professional refugees.

Subsequent policy documents began to address this issue. The Consultation Paper for A New Model for National Refugee Integration Services in England (Home Office, 2006a) proposed a specialist employment advice service for skilled refugees. However, the consultation process, which included input from a large number of refugee support organisations, concluded that this would not be desirable and an employment service should be available to all refugees (Home Office, 2008). So the new strategy comprises a Refugee Integration and Employment Service (RIES; Home Office, 2009), delivered regionally, offering a 12-month service to each person with newly granted refugee status or humanitarian protection⁶. They are allocated a case worker and receive advice and support for initial critical needs such as housing, education and access to benefits; employment advice to help the person enter long-term employment at the earliest opportunity; and a mentoring service, giving the person an opportunity to be matched with a mentor from the receiving community. There is an expectation that at least 30% of refugees who accept help from the RIES will find work within 12 months of receiving their status, and crucially, this is any employment, not within their profession. Even those who gain employment are likely to be underemployed, and appropriate professional guidance may be lacking. The mentoring service recruits volunteers to the task, and although these will doubtless be committed individuals, if they lack specific knowledge of the professions their usefulness will be limited. We have acted as mentors on a scheme partnering our University with the Refugee Council and have experience of meeting refugees who have been given inaccurate or misleading advice about higher education by generic support services. While some professions have widely publicised and national initiatives for engaging with refugees⁷, these are all in the public sector. Other initiatives have tended to be localised or short-term projects⁸. While most of the doctors we interviewed had engaged with the initiatives provided by the Health Service or professional associations, only the archaeologist who was determined to find work in his profession was aware of the importance of joining professional networks. However, few professional bodies have developed meaningful and embedded support mechanisms for refugees, despite their charitable or chartered status, both of which require evidence of public interest and/or educational benefits (and both of which confer considerable reputational and financial benefits). Other authors have highlighted the need for refugee support organisations, educational institutions and employers to work in partnership to provide the necessary services to support refugees into meaningful employment (Shiferaw and Hagos, 2002). It has also been noted that despite many interventions to make refugees more employable and empowered, employers continue to be suspicious of refugees

(Tomlinson and Egan, 2002). We would argue that a missing component for professional refugees are the professional bodies who are independent of employers but who can provide the specific advice and mentoring that is required, and whose association would legitimise the refugees in the eyes of employers.

Demographic changes are leading to a reduction in the working age population of the UK, and this growing crisis in labour supply, particularly skilled labour, has prompted policy changes to alleviate the problem. A partial solution lies in increasing migration into the UK (McCarthy, 2001), and this has led to a new points-based system for highly skilled migrant workers, facilitating entry to the UK for those skilled migrants who will “benefit” it (Home Office, 2006b). Within this policy context, there is an existing pool of skilled labour which is not being utilised, namely, qualified, professional refugees, possessing skills in many of the sectors facing growing recruitment difficulties, and who are “active” and “achievers” in their outlook on resettlement and employment. Appropriate targeted support would release a wealth of unused talents in the UK population, including in areas of the economy where there are recognised skills shortages. On a human level, they would do much to alleviate the disillusionment, despair and loss of identity which many professional refugees feel through not being able to pursue their chosen career, and help prevent these achievers becoming victims of the system.

NOTES

1. Refugees into Teaching is a national project to supporting refugee teachers' access into training, events, work placements and employment. <http://www.refugeesintoteaching.org.uk/>
2. RAGU supports refugees with high level education or professional qualifications into employment and education. <http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/ragu/>
4. The Asylum Seekers and Refugees into Employment project supported the analysis of 800 skills audits of asylum seekers and refugees in Wolverhampton including employers' attitudes to asylum seekers and refugees
3. REMAS HE is a joint service provided by the University of Brighton and University of Sussex which aims to support refugees who wish to access higher education. http://www.brighton.ac.uk/cupp/projects/ref_phase2.htm
5. The projects were supported by Equal and Aimhigher, with partnerships including the Local Authority, colleges, universities, the Refugee Council and other voluntary and community support organisations in Yorkshire. See Stevenson and Willott (2005, 2007) for more details. We would like to acknowledge the role of Anna Young and colleagues in developing and delivering the courses.
6. The support services described only apply to new cases of those claiming asylum. There are also those “legacy” cases from before the introduction of New Asylum Model (5th March 2007), which had remained “unresolved”. These cases, which may comprise half of those individuals achieving refugee status in the region, are not eligible for integration support. See

http://www.migrationyorkshire.org.uk/userfiles/file/PolicyandResearch/YHRMP_Reports/YHRMP_status&category_jan08v2.pdf

7. These include the National Health Service (see <http://www.rose.nhs.uk/Pages/Home.aspx>), teaching (see <http://www.refugeesintoteaching.org.uk/>) and higher education (see <http://www.academic-refugees.org/>).

8.. See for example

<http://www.migrationyorkshire.org.uk/?page=directoryviewanditemid=1155>
or <http://www.prestopartnership.org.uk/>

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Figures

Figure 1: The Transition Model (from Marshall 1992)

