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Refugees in the UK Labour Market: The Conflict between Economic Integration and Policy-led Labour Market Restriction

ALICE BLOCH

Department of Sociology, City University, Northampton Square, London EC1V 0HB
email: a.bloch@city.ac.uk

Abstract

This article draws on data from a survey of 400 refugees and shows low levels of labour market activity. The minority of refugees who are working are in secondary sector jobs with little opportunity for progression. Moreover, refugees with high levels of skills who are working are not in jobs commensurate with their skills and qualifications. The article examines the human capacity and personal characteristics that have an impact on refugee employment, and finds the greatest difference in employment is between men and women, although English language fluency and training are also very important. Employment is a major part of the refugee integration strategy, and employment initiatives focus on capacity-building rather than discrimination or reversing restrictive policies. The article concludes that strategies need to focus on individual employability as well as measures to overcome personal and structural barriers to the labour market.

This article examines the inherent contradiction between UK refugee integration strategies that focus on employment and, in particular, the employability of refugees, and restrictive government policies that negatively affect access to the labour market. The article argues that a real commitment to the economic integration of refugees requires a radical reform of recent policy that contributes to exclusion and underemployment. The article will first examine the position of employment in refugee integration policy. Secondly, the main factors that have an impact on refugee employment will be explored, and the importance of human capacity such as English language and refugees' personal characteristics will be highlighted. Thirdly, refugees' perceptions of their own barriers to the labour market which revolve around human capacity issues will be considered. Finally, the position of highly skilled refugees with English language fluency will be explored to show the ways in which refugee integration policy is not addressing their unemployment and underemployment because of the failure of policy to address discrimination and the ways in which current refugee policies add to economic exclusion.

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The article will draw on a reanalysis of data from six focus groups with stakeholders and community representatives, and a survey of 400 refugees with permission to work from five communities living in five localities.[1] The five communities were Somali, Tamil, Kosovan, Turkish and Iraqi, and face-to-face interviews using translated questionnaires were carried out in London, the North West, North East, Midlands and Yorkshire and Humberside. In the absence of a sampling frame of refugees (see Robinson, 1998; Bloch, 2004) quotas were set for country of origin, length of residence, age, gender and region. Multiple gatekeepers or contacts were used to identify respondents for the study in order to maximise the extent to which the survey represented the diversity of the refugee experience.[2] The fieldwork took place between February and May 2002. In the final sample, 80 interviews – 40 with men and 40 with women–were carried out with people from each of the five communities included in the study.

Background: economic integration

Increased numbers of spontaneous asylum seekers to the UK since the late 1980s have resulted in a series of restrictive legislative changes alongside the introduction of strategies aimed at facilitating the social and economic inclusion of refugees. Since New Labour took up office in 1997, there have been four Acts concerned with asylum, immigration and nationality (1999, 2002, 2004 and 2006). For the most part, the legislation has been restrictive, with the aim of trying to reduce the number of asylum seekers arriving in the UK. This has included increased border controls, reducing access to welfare for asylum seekers, the dispersal of asylum seekers, a more effective 'removals' system for 'failed' asylum seekers, an increase in the detention estate and the introduction of a five-year plan which gives only temporary leave for those granted refugee status rather than a permanent status.

There have also been changes to the employment rights of asylum seekers that affect labour market participation. Since 2002, asylum seekers have not been allowed to apply for permission to work unless they have been waiting for a decision on their case for more than 12 months. The delay in accessing training and employment opportunities can result in a loss of skills, especially among professionals. In a study of refugee doctors, Stewart argues that it is crucial 'not to allow time to pass when people could become de-skilled because once in an unskilled position or on welfare it will become increasingly difficult to re-enter the medical profession' (2003: 9). Secondly, fines are placed on employers who hire refugees without the correct documentation and this can make employers reluctant to check documentation or risk penalties (Hurstfield *et al.*, 2004). The 2006 *Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Act* has strengthened early powers to prosecute employers taking on workers legally excluded from the regular labour market. Thirdly, the introduction of the five-year rule in 2005 removing the long-term security of refugees by granting leave to remain for five years and reassessing

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status at the end of five years based on a review of conditions in their country of origin will negatively affect longer-term security and so may well prevent personal investment in education and training in the UK context.

Alongside restrictive measures have been policies aimed at facilitating the integration of refugees and this has included the formation, in 2000, of the National Refugee Integration Forum (NRIF) with five subgroups, including one concerned with employment and training. The NRIF, which was disbanded at the end of 2006, was tasked with identifying and recommending solutions to the issues faced by refugees. Their work is continuing while the Home Office is developing a new service model to continue its core refugee integration work. Integration strategies focus only on those recognised as refugees under the 1951 Geneva Convention and those granted discretionary leave or humanitarian protection rather than asylum seekers who are waiting for a decision on their case.

The government accepts that integration 'begins on day one' but argues that integration, 'in its fullest sense can take place only when a person has been granted refugee status so that they can make plans, including those for employment' (Home Office, 2005: 14). The specific strategies for integration are included in the documents *Full and Equal Citizens* (Home Office, 2000), *Integration Matters: A National Strategy for Refugee Integration* (Home Office, 2005), *Working to Rebuild Lives* which is the Department for Work and Pensions' (2005) strategy for refugee employment, and the Home Office (2006) consultation paper *A New Model for Refugee Integration Services in England*. These documents all recognise the importance of employment in the successful integration of refugees. Although the term integration is a contested one with meaning varying by context, time and perception (Castles *et al.*, 2002), the Home Office (2005) maintains that integration takes place when refugees achieve their full potential as members of British society, contribute to the community and access the services to which they are entitled. In terms of achieving full potential, the Home Office identifies two factors as being crucial: 'the ability to communicate effectively in English and gaining employment appropriate to their skills and ability' (2005: 20).

Employment therefore forms a key aspect of refugee integration policies, although it is also an important component of the broader social inclusion and poverty alleviation agenda for disadvantaged groups, including minority ethnic groups. The persistent underemployment of minority ethnic groups has resulted in the formation of the Ethnic Minority Employment Task Force with the aim of implementing the key recommendations from the Cabinet Office's 2003 report *Ethnic Minorities and the Labour Market*. The report noted the diversity between and within minority ethnic groups and concluded that, as a whole, underachievement in the labour market affects self-esteem and confidence, while high rates of unemployment, and comparatively low levels of income among those who are working, have adverse consequences not only for national income

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and economic growth but also for the social and economic inclusion of the individual.

The diversity in the employment experiences between and within different minority ethnic groups is highlighted in the report although, on average, people from minority ethnic groups are disadvantaged in the four key indictor areas of: employment/unemployment rates, earnings levels, occupational attainment and progression in the workplace, and levels of self-employment. Although the causes of disadvantage are multiple and complex, and include class, geography and migration patterns, the report argues that the most important factors are education and skills, the ability to access opportunities, and discrimination (Cabinet Office, 2003).

The strategies to combat the underachievement of minority ethnic groups in the labour market combine capacity-building measures to raise levels of employability through education and skills attainment, better connections to work, and the promotion of equal opportunities. The emphasis is therefore on tackling individual capacity with social policy measures, including equal opportunities. However, in contrast, strategies in respect of refugee employment focus on refugee employability and, to a lesser extent, raising awareness among employers of refugee skills, rather than discrimination and equality of opportunity (DWP, 2005; Home Office, 2005; Employability Forum, 2006).

Very little is known about the labour market position of refugees compared with minority ethnic groups as a whole, although the limited data show lower levels of employment among refugees (29 per cent) than minority ethnic groups (65 per cent) and the greater propensity of refugees, if working, to be underemployed and clustered in a few sectors with low pay and poor employment prospects. Refugees also earn on average only 79 per cent of that earned by other minority ethnic people (Office for National Statistics, 2003; Bloch, 2002). This means that the negative impacts of unemployment, underemployment and low pay identified in the Cabinet Office (2003) report are magnified for refugees. Some of the factors that result in the relative disadvantage of minority ethnic groups in the labour market are experienced more acutely by refugees. For instance, there is a greater propensity for first-generation minority ethnic migrants to do less well in the labour market than their children, and refugees are more likely to be recent arrivals. Additionally, refugees are more likely to experience the negative effects of limited access to job and social networks due to the dispersal of asylum seekers under the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act. This has meant less geographical mobility and fewer opportunities to move to areas where there is employment.

Refugee employment issues can be categorised into barriers to the labour market that emerge from the policy context and other external factors, such as discrimination and employer reluctance to check documentation, together with those which relate to the individuals' need to acquire new knowledge and skills (Green, 2005). Moreover, refugees can also experience barriers that are

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a consequence of being a refugee, such as trauma, stress and health problems as a result of torture or separation from family members. Thus, barriers to the labour market combine structural, group and individual components. A criticism levelled at refugee employment research is the tendency to place emphasis on human capital rather than structural, physical and psycho-social factors. Archer *et al.* (2005) note the relative absence of an analysis of racism and systematic discrimination and certainly, as noted earlier, while highly evident in the interventions necessary to alleviate ethnic minority disadvantage in the labour market, this remains largely absent from the research on refugee employment and in government integration policy.

The data used in this article were collected with the aim of exploring which personal and human capacity factors interacted both with participation in the labour market and barriers to participation. English language, training and qualifications are all important and relevant and do clearly demonstrate a need among some refugees for capacity-building. However, there is much diversity among refugees and some are fluent in English, have high levels of qualifications (degree and higher) and professional work experience but still remain unemployed or underemployed. Capacity-building would not be the solution for these refugees. Thus, discrimination and refugee policy need to be critically examined to help meet the Home Office integration objective, which includes refugees achieving their full potential by gaining employment commensurate to skills and ability.

Factors affecting employment: personal characteristics and human capital

Refugees arrive in the UK with varied pre-migration characteristics, experiences and differing educational, employment and skills bases. A skills audit carried out by the Home Office highlights the diversity between and within some refugee groups. For example, among Zimbabweans, 92 per cent arrived in the UK with a qualification and there was little difference between men and women (93 per cent of men arrived in the UK with a qualification compared with 90 per cent of women). In contrast, however, among Somalis 14 per cent arrived in the UK with a qualification, and more than half (55 per cent) of Somali refugee women had received no formal education compared with a quarter (24 per cent) of Somali men (Kirk, 2004). However, research has consistently demonstrated that, on average, refugees arrive in the UK with relatively high educational qualifications and strong employment histories (Charlaff *et al.*, 2004; Kirk, 2004).

Prior to arriving in the UK, refugees have had varied employment profiles, including employment experiences across a wide spectrum of occupations and skill levels. Kirk (2004) found that 22 per cent had been in managerial and senior positions, 15 per cent had been in professional occupations and 23 per cent of

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those who had been working prior to migration had been in skilled trades. The survey of 400 refugees used in this article found that 12 per cent had arrived in the UK with a degree or a higher degree, and 4 per cent had a professional qualification. Since being in the UK, 4 per cent had obtained a degree or higher degree. Rates of employment in the UK were extremely low, with only 29 per cent working at the time of the survey. Those who were working were clustered in a few types of low-skilled secondary sector jobs such as catering and shop work, which are characterised by low pay and poor terms and conditions of employment, with little chance for progression (Bloch, 2002).

The analysis of the data for this article sets out to examine, first, the personal and human capacity factors that interact with refugee employment and, second, through a binary logistic regression the odds ratio of the key explanatory variables. Bivariate analysis revealed that English language, education and qualifications, training, length of residence, region of residence, immigration status, age and gender all had an impact on the propensity for refugees to be working. Put simply, the research found that those refugees who are working are the most proficient in English, have arrived with a qualification and/or obtained a qualification in the UK, have participated in training in the UK, have been resident for three years or more, are more likely to live in certain regions (Yorkshire and Humberside and London) than others, have received a positive decision on their case, are less than 35 years old, are male and are more likely to be from Sri Lanka and least likely to be from Somalia.

A logistic regression that included the variables of English language, education and qualifications in the UK and elsewhere, training, length of residence, region of residence, immigration status, age and gender was carried out. As the data used are not from a random sample, they provide only an indication rather than generalisable evidence of the likelihood of employment.

Table 1 shows that the highest odds ratio (Exp(B)) is between men and women, with men over four times as likely as women to be in paid employment. Some of the variables in the model interact, such as gender and language competence, and language competence and training. However, 37 per cent of the variation in employment is explained by the seven variables in the model presented in Table 1. What is also of interest is the variables that were not included in the final model, including region of residence, which has become increasingly important since the introduction of dispersal under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. The rationale for dispersal included 'burden-sharing' between regions and ensuring better community relations by avoiding concentrations of refugees in particular localities (Boswell, 2001, 2003). However, it also meant that new asylum seekers could find themselves dispersed to areas with depressed local economies. Previous research has revealed significant variation in labour market activity by region and highlighted the influence of local economic structures at the time of migration (Ho and Henderson, 1999).

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TABLE 1. Logistic regression to identify determinants of employment in the UK (reference category are those who are working).

	B	Exp (B)	Significance
Sex			
Men	1.537	4.650	0.000
Women			
Whether participated in training in the UK			
Yes	1.265	3.544	0.000
No			
Age			
Under 35	1.258	3.520	0.000
35 and over			
English language competence			
Fluent	1.106	3.520	0.000
Not fluent			
Whether had qualifications on arrival			
Yes	0.944	2.570	0.000
No			
Length of residence in the UK			
3 years or more	0.835	2.305	0.004
Less than 3 years			
Main activity before coming to the UK			
Working	0.746	2.109	0.010
Not working			
Nagelkerke R Square = 0.371			

Gender and employment

Research concerned with refugee women has found consistently low levels of labour market participation: lower than that experienced by their male counterparts. Even women with professional qualifications that are in demand such as doctors and teachers experience low levels of employment and, where they are working, are unable to find commensurate work in their professions (Dumper, 2002). Common to men and women can be the need to improve English competency and, among professionals, to re-qualify as many qualifications are not transferable at the equivalent level. However, women are more affected by childcare responsibilities, and for some women there are also cultural norms that affect their economic activity, although exile can result in the redefinition of gender roles (Matsuoka and Sorenson, 1999).

In this research 16 per cent of women (31 out of 200) were in paid work compared with 42 per cent of men. Table 2 shows the differences in employment by country of origin and gender. Respondents from Sri Lanka were more likely to be working, while Iraqi women were the least likely to be employed.

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TABLE 2. Number in employment by country of origin and sex: frequencies.

	Men	Women	All
Somalia	9	7	16
Turkey	16	9	25
Iraq	18	1	19
Sri Lanka	25	11	36
Kosova	15	3	18
	83	31	114

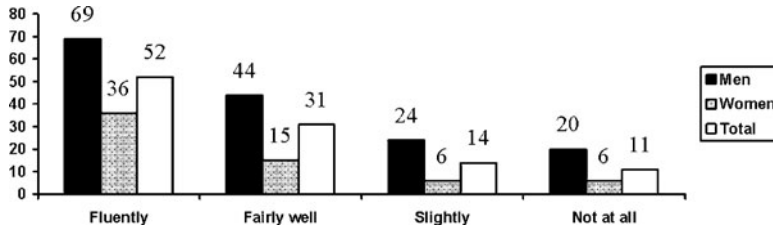

Figure 1. Proportion working by level of spoken English and gender
Notes: Base number 400, Cramer's V men = 0.332, Cramer's V women = 0.326.

Of those who were working in the UK and had worked in their country of origin, only five were doing similar jobs. There was clear evidence of women taking on less skilled employment, a pattern also evident among their male counterparts. Among women, terms and conditions of employment were generally poor, with a third in temporary posts; half of those were in temporary work because their job was casual. Those in temporary posts were for the most part in them because they could not find a permanent job (seven out of ten). Just over half were entitled to holiday pay (16 out of 31) and a similar number were in part-time employment. Half of those who were working part-time were doing so because they were not able to find a full-time job.

The factors that were most strongly related to employment for refugee women was whether they had obtained a formal qualification in the UK and English language fluency, although the two interact. Forty-four per cent of women who had obtained a UK qualification were working, compared with only 8 per cent who had not obtained a qualification. Figure 1 shows that language was similarly associated with employment for men and women, although the proportions of women working, as compared to men, were lower for each English language level of competency.

Gender also affected whether people were looking for work. While 57 per cent of men who were not working at the time of the survey were looking for paid work, among women the proportion was 22 per cent. More than half (53 per cent) of the women interviewed who were not looking for work

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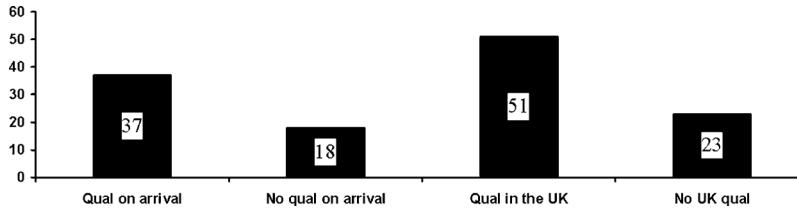

Figure 2. Percentage of refugees in employment by qualifications
Note: Base number: 400.

were not looking because of family and/or childcare commitments compared with 5 per cent of men, indicating the location of women within the domestic sphere.

Training and employment

Table 1 showed that those who had participated in training were three and a half times more likely to be working than those without training. Two-thirds of those who had participated in training in the past were working at the time of the survey compared with a quarter who had never trained. While training produced a positive outcome in terms of economic activity, there was little evidence that the subject of the training was used in the UK labour market. One focus group participant noted the way in which this could lead to further disillusionment:

> Basically, just providing training doesn't work and sometimes it increases the disillusionment of the community because you raise expectation and then nothing happens. I'm not saying that training is not good; training is good, but it needs to be backed up with follow-up support and resources to get them into employment.

The take-up of training was very low: only 12 per cent of respondents had experience of training in the UK, although demand was high, with 60 per cent expressing a desire to participate in training. Part of the reason for low take up was a lack of knowledge about publicly funded training opportunities because the UK system can be very different from that of other countries. However, the reason for not training mentioned most often was a lack of English language skills or wanting to learn English first (28 per cent). A lack of childcare was mentioned by 26 per cent of women and 1 per cent of men. Childcare provision as a barrier to women's participation is all the more prevalent in exile as exile removes from women the support structures of social and kinship groups.

Qualifications and employment

Arriving with qualifications and obtaining qualifications in the UK affect labour market outcomes for refugees. Figure 2 shows that a higher proportion of

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those who had obtained a qualification in the UK were working than those who had a qualification from outside the UK.

Refugees who do have qualifications can experience problems transferring them, and for the most part if they are recognised it is not at the equivalent level. Only a minority (15 per cent) of those with qualifications had tried to get them recognised in the UK and only 16 per cent of those with a degree or higher on arrival in the UK had successfully transferred their qualification. The reason why those with qualifications did not try and get them recognised varied, but those mentioned most often were a lack of English, not needing to get them recognised and not having certificates with them.

For refugees the lack of evidence of past achievements, including certificates and employer references, can hinder employment prospects. It is therefore not surprising that those who had obtained qualifications before coming to the UK were more likely to be working, although in jobs that did not for the most part reflect their level of educational attainment. Moreover, even when people did have their documentation, many professional qualifications are not given equivalent status, so retraining is required and this can deter people (Stewart, 2003), especially where re-training costs money and refugees lack long-term security of status so the investment in re-training is not necessarily going to be beneficial.

Obtaining a high level qualification in the UK had a positive effect on earnings. Refugees in employment who had obtained a degree or higher in the UK were earning, on average, £12.10 an hour. This compared positively with the £8.23 an hour earned, on average, by refugees who had a degree from outside of the UK. However, gaining a degree in the UK did not eliminate the earnings disadvantage experienced by refugees who were paid, on average, £1.61 less an hour than minority ethnic graduates. Moreover, 11 per cent of those who were working were paid less than the minimum wage, which is a reflection on the type of employment in which refugees were engaged. One focus group respondent highlighted some of the problems faced by refugees who work in service industries such as cleaning.

> They're working incredibly long hours, they don't receive training at work, most of them are doing unskilled work anyway or work where the training needs are not particularly high level. There's no career progression, there's no opportunities for career progression within those companies, they are basically bad employers, which is where these people can find work. No fringe benefits really and the wages are extremely low, around, or just above the minimum wage.

Refugees' views about barriers to the labour market and help and advice wanted

Refugees were asked what they thought was their main barrier to the labour market and what additional barriers they experienced. The data in Table 3 show that factors relating to capacity and employability – English language, lack of

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TABLE 3. Main barrier and all barriers to the labour market.

	Main barrier	Percentages All barriers
English language/literacy	30	48
Lack of UK work experience	19	42
No qualifications	7	25
Awaiting decision on status/immigration status	6	10
Employer discrimination	5	21
Qualifications not recognised	5	12
Unfamiliarity with the UK system	5	24
Lack of information	5	17

Note: Base number: 149.

UK work experience and not having qualifications – were mentioned most often. Not surprisingly, the characteristics of respondents affected the barriers they experienced accessing the labour market. For example, English language as a barrier was mentioned by 80 per cent of those who spoke English slightly or not at all, 47 per cent of those who spoke English fairly well and 8 per cent of those who spoke fluently.

Around a fifth also mentioned employer discrimination as one of a number of barriers to the labour market they experienced. Discrimination is a common experience, as identified by the Policy Studies Institute's Fourth National Survey in which 20 per cent of ethnic minority respondents said that they had been discriminated against in the labour market (Modood *et al.*, 1997). The impact of religion on labour market outcomes has been highlighted by research that found that South Asian Muslims were less likely to be employed than other South Asian religious minorities (Brown, 2000) and that Muslims who were working earned less than others (Lindley, 2002). In the survey of refugees reported on here, 7 per cent of Muslim and 1 per cent of Hindu respondents said that employer discrimination was their main barrier to the labour market, while around a quarter of both Muslims and Hindus identified it as one of the barriers they experienced. No one from other religious groups, which were predominately Christian (of various denominations), identified employer discrimination as a barrier. Clearly, for refugees, employer discrimination is a very real barrier to the labour market, but is not perceived to be as prevalent a barrier as language, work experience in the UK and qualifications.

Table 4 shows that refugees also identified factors relating to their own skills and knowledge as the main areas where they thought help would be most useful. English language training was mentioned most often, followed by general advice and help with job search and applications.

Policy interventions are directed towards factors that relate to human capital and reflect the type of strategies that refugees identify for themselves. Current

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TABLE 4. Help or advice thought to be most useful to help find the kind of job wanted.

	Frequency	Row %
English language training	44	31
Information about where to find job vacancies	32	23
General information about methods of job seeking	16	11
Help with job applications	13	9
Advice on interview techniques	11	8
Literacy training	2	1
Help on approaching employers	2	1
Mentoring	2	1
Help with childcare	2	1
Work experience	2	1
References	2	1
Immigration status	2	1
How to get qualifications	2	1
None	3	2
*Other	7	5

Notes: Base number: 142.
Missing: 7.
*Other included loan to set up business; help from friends and advice on information technology skills.

policy initiatives are detailed in the progress report for the National Refugee Integration Forum Employment and Training Subgroup (Employability Forum, 2006) and include SUNRISE (Strategic Upgrade of National Refugee Integration Services), which is the main strand of the refugee integration strategy. SUNRISE currently operates in four areas and allocates refugees a case worker who provides advice and guidance once they have received a positive decision on their case. The Employability Forum noted at the early stages of the initiative that, 'feedback suggests that most refugees are not job ready and Sunrise caseworkers have found that refugees require more urgent support . . . there is an expectation that the balance of support will shift from a focus on social welfare issues to employment and training advice' (2006: 15). The other main strand is Time Together Mentoring, which is a volunteer mentoring scheme. Both initiatives can certainly contribute towards helping in the areas of job search and advice about the whole process of job seeking and accessing training and language provision. However, what SUNRISE highlights is that refugees have a range of needs of which employment is only one, and not necessarily the immediate one.

The labour market position of highly skilled refugees

In addition to strategies that focus on employability, there is also the very real issue of underemployment and barriers to commensurate employment

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faced by refugee professionals. It is recognised that statutory agencies such as JobCentre Plus cannot offer advice to professionals or support long-term retraining necessary to practice in chosen professions in the UK (Employability Forum, 2006). There are some schemes to help refugee professionals, but the Employability Forum notes that 'there are still many challenges to face in helping refugee professionals into employment' (2006: 22).

In this study, 7 per cent of respondents (27 out of 400) had, as their highest qualification, a degree, a postgraduate qualification or a professional qualification (such as teaching, business or nursing) on arrival in the UK and in addition were fluent in English at the time of the survey. Before coming to the UK, 21 of the 27 were working, four were students and two were looking after their home and family. The most frequent job was teaching: seven had been teachers. In contrast, in the UK only nine were in paid employment at the time of the survey and none was working as a teacher; instead there was clear evidence of underemployment. While the numbers are small, they illustrate a pattern of underemployment that is even more clearly demonstrated in a study of Zimbabwean refugees in the UK.

Recent research with 500 Zimbabweans in the UK that included 63 respondents who had come through the asylum system and had permission to work (Bloch, 2005) found that 76 per cent of these 63 refugees were working at the time of the survey. This is almost identical to the average national employment figure of 74.6 per cent. However, in terms of unemployment rates, Zimbabweans were more likely to be unemployed than the population as a whole, at 8 per cent and 5.5 per cent respectively.[3] Eighty per cent of men and 72 per cent of women were working. Nearly everyone was fluent in English, everyone had a formal academic qualification on arrival, and 40 per cent were qualified to degree level or higher. Half had obtained a qualification in the UK of which more than three quarters had obtained a degree or higher, so this group were not educationally disadvantaged. However, despite their very high skills base and their participation in the labour market, there was a mismatch between pre-migration employment and current employment. Prior to coming to the UK, the single largest number who had been working had been teachers (nine) while in the UK the single largest number of those working were employed as carers/care assistants (ten). Before coming to the UK, Zimbabweans who were now working as carers had been in professional jobs that included finance and accountancy, teaching and nursing. Part of the problem is the non-recognition of qualifications and for some the notion of temporariness that prevents embarking on re-training. The government has recognised that professional refugees may benefit from specialist employment advice (Home Office, 2006), but this is only part of a complex equation. It is not possible, in this context, to ignore the conclusion of the Cabinet Office Report (2003) that highlighted the 'ethnic penalty'; that is, the employment disadvantage that ethnic minorities experience after measurable factors such as human capital are accounted for. A real commitment to the integration of refugees means that

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employer discrimination, race relations and restrictive asylum policy cannot be ignored.

Discussion

The article has focused on the human capacity and personal characteristics that have an impact on refugee employment, as well as other major barriers to refugee employment. It has highlighted the emphasis that refugees themselves place on their own capacities and knowledge, and the way that, in turn, policy interventions such as SUNRISE are also mainly focused on helping refugees to get job-ready through advice and guidance. In reality, though, a productive strategy aimed at helping refugees into appropriate work that makes use of their skills and experiences needs to also reassess and challenge employer attitudes and discrimination, and the media stereotyping of refugees, alongside legislative and other policy interventions.

Strategies need to focus on individual employability *as well* as measures to overcome both personal and structural barriers. Employment strategies such as language training, local work experience and information need to be developed alongside systematic responses such as qualification recognition, the reinstatement of the right to legal employment for asylum seekers, addressing discrimination from prospective employers, and improving service delivery and outcomes. Certainly it is known that there is lack of equality in terms of New Deal outcomes between white and minority ethnic customers (Ethnic Minority Task Force, 2004), that the take up of the statutory services among refugees is much less than among other groups, and that these services do not meet the needs of skilled and professional job seekers from refugee backgrounds (Bloch, 2002; Employability Forum, 2006).

Methods of job seeking and successful routes to employment can vary between cultures and communities. Prior to migration, nearly two-thirds (63 per cent) of refugees had found their most recent job through informal kinship or social networks. These informal networks continued to be important in the UK, but resulted in largely unskilled work with few opportunities for progression. Other research has also identified the low use of statutory provision and the dependence on refugees from within the same community who have been in Britain longer to provide information and help getting into work (Humphries *et al.*, 2005). This can result in the perpetuation of secondary sector employment.

Schuster and Solomos argue that there is the need for a critical analysis of New Labour policies and that these policies 'seem likely to lead to new patterns of marginalization and exclusion' (2004: 284). Focusing on capacity alone can mask the needs and barriers faced by highly skilled refugees with fluent English, high educational qualifications and high-level pre-migration employment experience. In fact, some highly skilled refugees reflect the profile of migrants that the

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government is trying to attract and allocate visas to under the Highly Skilled Migrants Programme (HSMP) which forms part of a wider managed migration strategy. It makes sense to facilitate and utilise the skills of these highly skilled refugees, even if they are not part of the programme.

The commitment to refugee integration through capacity-building has to take into account diversity of need and go hand in hand with tackling discrimination and structural barriers. It is only then that refugees might be in a position to begin to achieve their potential while in the UK. Research needs to analyse in much greater detail the impact and effects of racism and systematic discrimination from agencies and employers on refugees' opportunities. Moreover, constant research and evaluation are necessary to assess the impact of the ever-changing policy context.

Ensuring that refugees are able to achieve their potential would be in the interests of individuals and their families, the UK economy and the country of origin (through remittances and other transfers). In the longer term, the maintenance or acquisition of new skills would contribute to the post-conflict reconstruction and the development potential of refugee returnees. The issue of skills on return is especially relevant in light of the five-year review. If refugees are to be repatriated, then returning people to their country of origin with fewer skills than they had on arrival should be inconceivable.

Notes

1 The focus groups were convened by Helen Barnes and transcribed by Gaby Atfield. Some of the data have been used in a different form in Bloch (2002).
2 See Bloch (2004) for detailed discussion of the methods.
3 http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id = 120.

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