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An Investigation into the Barriers to Education and Employment for Forced Migrants in the Convergence Areas of Wales

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Dr Mike Chick and
Iona Hannagan Lewis

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Ysgoloriaethau Sgiliau Economi Gwybodaeth
Knowledge Economy Skills Scholarships

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Foreword

As its Chief Executive Officer, I am extremely proud that the Welsh Refugee Council has taken part in this research project. One of our strategic aims as an organisation is to enable asylum seekers and refugees to become integrated, independent, active members of Welsh society and I believe findings from this study make us far better informed about the challenges that face refugees who are being resettled across Wales.

As the evidence in the report highlights so vividly, the need to provide refugees with assistance in accessing education and employment is as great as ever. The report illustrates just how crucial it is to provide help and guidance to enable access to training, education and learning. Support should also focus on familiarising people with British style interviews and career pathways to maximise their chances with employment.

The collaboration between the Welsh Refugee Council and the University of South Wales has, over several years, been of tremendous benefit to newly arrived asylum seekers in Wales, to University students and to staff at both institutions. The publication of this report is an example of what can be achieved through institutions working together, which, I hope, will serve as a springboard for more Higher Education / Third sector partnerships.

One such collaboration that has brought organisations together in Wales is the Welsh Refugee Coalition. That multi-agency partnership of charitable organisations aspires to be an exemplar in providing a dignified, humanistic approach to providing sanctuary and recently worked with the Welsh Government in constructing the Nation of Sanctuary Refugee and Asylum Seeker Plan (2019a). I believe this report will make a positive contribution to that aspiration of making Wales a real Nation of Sanctuary for people looking to escape danger and persecution and to rebuild their lives in our country.

Finally, I would like to point out how timely the report is in that it provides a glimpse of the structural racism that exists and that all of us have been forced to acknowledge and confront through the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. More than ever, integration must be viewed as a two-way process.

Andrea Cleaver
Chief Executive Officer
Welsh Refugee Council

The Welsh Refugee Council

We are a charity with 30 years' experience working with asylum seekers and refugees in Wales. We are driven by a passion for human rights, equality and social justice and a desire to make Wales a welcoming nation of sanctuary for those seeking our protection.

Our Values

We champion human rights, equality and diversity.

We empower and promote the voices of refugees and asylum seekers.

We are a strong, independent voice that demonstrates leadership, builds capacity and works collaboratively.

We exemplify organisational excellence in service delivery, staff development and governance.

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AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE BARRIERS TO EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT FOR FORCED MIGRANTS IN THE CONVERGENCE AREAS OF WALES

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Introduction

With rising numbers of people seeking safety comes an increased need for UK Governments to ensure populations live cohesively together, and that new arrivals integrate successfully into established communities.

Bringing skills, training, and expertise in an enormous range of occupations, refugees are often keen to put their work experience and energies to good use. Nevertheless, with regards to gaining employment, there is considerable evidence to suggest that refugees are at a particular disadvantage when accessing the labour market in the UK. Recent publications from both the House of Commons and the National Assembly for Wales have connected migrants' English language proficiency to social outcomes including integration and access to employment and training (House of Commons 2017; National Assembly for Wales 2017). It therefore follows that policies for successful integration should ensure access to meaningful employment and language learning for those who seek safety in the United Kingdom.

The authors of this report welcome recent policy interventions from the Welsh Government which have sought to improve the lives and promote the harmonious co-existence of Wales' diverse communities, both migrant and native. These include the aspirations in the Wellbeing of Future Generations act (2015) ; the prioritisation of skills, learning and employability under the Welsh Government's national strategy for Prosperity for All (2017); the introduction of an ESOL Policy for Wales (2018); and the Welsh Government's Nation of Sanctuary Refugee and Asylum Seeker Plan (2019a), co-produced with the Welsh Refugee Coalition. These policies set a strong context for improving integration outcomes in Wales.

The following report draws strongly on such policy statements and is an attempt to illuminate the reality on the ground for people on resettlement programmes in Wales. One of the main aims of the report is to provide a vehicle for refugees' voices to be heard. The data on which it is based has been gathered from participants and stakeholders involved in the UK Government's managed resettlement programme – the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS)[1].

Since the establishment of the SVPRS in September 2015, all 22 local authority areas in Wales have welcomed Syrian families and over 1200 people have been resettled (Home Office 2020). Of note is the fact that SVPRS has resettled refugees in all areas of the UK, not just in those cities where refugee dispersal has traditionally occurred (Wales has four dispersal cities: Cardiff, Newport, Swansea and Wrexham). This means that, in many instances, families are resettled in areas where there is little or no established infrastructure to support refugees and where the provision of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is limited. There is little research evidence detailing the challenges and obstacles faced by migrants resettled in areas of Wales with relatively new migrant populations and this project has sought to address this by investigating three key questions:

- **Are there barriers for refugees in accessing education and employment in these regions? If so, what are they?**
- **What work is being done, at grassroots, regional and national levels, to overcome these barriers?**
- **How do forced migrants themselves feel about their education and employment (past, present and future), and their access to existing resources?**

The focus of the study has been on five local authority areas new to refugee resettlement. The county borough areas in which the case studies were researched are located in North, South, West and Mid Wales. These case study areas, while diverse in their economies, histories and industries, are united by the fact that they are outside the four areas of asylum seeker dispersal in Wales mentioned above. We consider that the findings will be of benefit to local authorities seeking to respond to the emergence of new migrant populations, and to policymakers seeking evidence with which to develop strategies for community cohesion.

[1]For a detailed description of all the data drawn on and referred to in this report and the methodology used in the study see:
Hannagan Lewis, I. (2019). An investigation into the Barriers to Education and Employment for Forced Migrants in the Convergence Areas of Wales. Masters' thesis. University of South Wales, and;

Chick, M. and Iona Hannagan Lewis, 'Language education for forced migrants: governance and approach', Languages 4:3 (2019): 74.
https://doi.org/10.3390/languages4030074

A note on the two-tier system

Despite facing considerable obstacles to accessing employment and education, it is important to note that participants on resettlement schemes such as the SVPRS receive significantly more support than refugees who go through the asylum process. Resettled refugees are given safe passage from a refugee camp to the UK. They are provided with private rented accommodation and supported by caseworkers responsible for assisting with many aspects of their integration in the UK, including opening a bank account, accessing ESOL classes, and securing spaces in schools for their children. They do not go through a period of being without right to work in the UK, and they are unlikely to experience, as a refused asylum seeker would, the threat of imminent deportation. Moreover, enhanced ESOL provision has been made possible by the additional resources offered to local authorities hosting refugees under the scheme. We believe that such a system of support should be a Government aim for all people seeking safety in a country that aspires to be a Nation of Sanctuary (Welsh Government 2019a).

Finally, while this project focuses on migrants' education and employment outcomes, it is our opinion that boosting community integration and tackling disadvantage cannot be achieved by developing migrants' skills alone. The authors feel that the structural barrier of racism brought to glaring light by movements such as Black Lives Matter mean that policy interventions to support migrant access to education and employment must occur in tandem with work to challenge xenophobic and discriminatory attitudes and practices, and to promote the positive vision of a multicultural, multilingual Wales.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was taken towards collecting the data for this project. First, we conducted a strategic review of existing literature on refugee education and employment.

This covered peer-reviewed academic papers, books and journal articles; impact reports from both government and non-government organisations; case studies from migrant employment projects run by charities and grassroots organisations, and testimonials gathered from people of a refugee and migrant background. The review identified gaps in existing scholarship on the experiences of forced migrants in Wales, particularly in areas new to refugee resettlement.

We pinpointed three research questions (outlined above) which formed the basis of a piloted questionnaire, with a revised version distributed in January 2018 to all SVPRS particiantsover the age of 16 in the five case study areas. The questionnaires gathered data relating to participants' age, gender, marital status, first language literacy, education and employment history, current employment and study, and aspiration. Forty five questionnaires were returned. A total of 58 SVPRS participants over the age of 16 participated in the focus groups, which were audio recorded and transcribed. In addition, we conducted interviews with 26 stakeholders across the five case study areas. This included; the local authority officials responsible for overseeing the resettlement, ESOL providers in the area, resettlement caseworkers, Job Centre Plus employees and staff from other organisations that support entry into employment and training, such as SOVA and Adult Learning Wales.

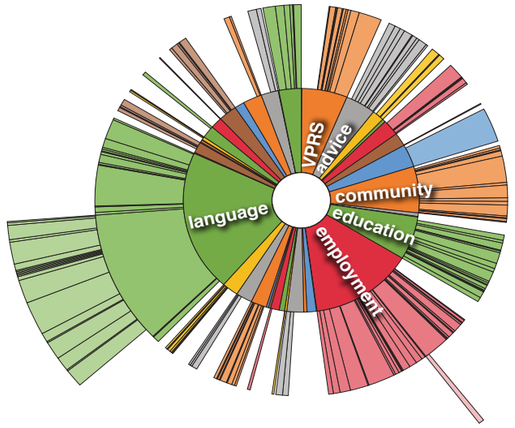
It should be noted that findings for this study are drawn from a very small research sample, and part of the reason for this is that the population of refugees resettled under SVPRS in Wales is itself small. These findings thus provide a snapshot of the lives of a specific group of people at a certain point in their experience of resettlement, and should not be extrapolated to be indicative of the experiences of the refugee or migrant populations in Wales as a whole.

Key Findings

Language & Education

This section outlines the **experiences** of resettled families with regards to the language education provided for them and identifies some of the **barriers** to effective ESOL provision.

Firstly, it is important to recognise that providing appropriate language support to individuals with distinct learner backgrounds, differing levels of competency and literacy, and who are often rehomed in geographically dispersed areas, is a complicated and labour-intensive task. Nevertheless, it is a challenge which must be confronted since language ability is central to all other areas of integration. Indeed, an analysis of focus group and interview transcriptions carried out for this research, reveals that "language" was the most referred to theme across the whole data set (fig.1).



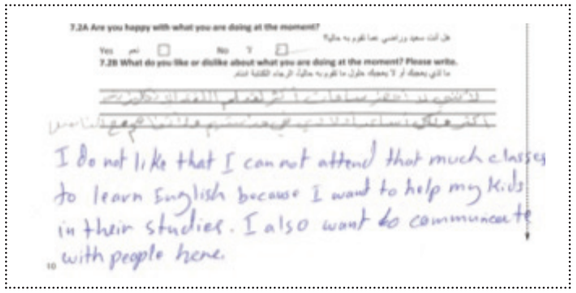
The Home Office also recognises the critical importance of language education for newly arrived refugees in the UK. In their guidance on SVPRS for local authorities, the granting of additional funding for classes of English to Speakers of Other Languages is framed as a way to "improve [resettled refugees'] resettlement and integration experience and employability". Thus, developing English (or Welsh) language competency is considered to be key to refugees enhancing their integration outcomes. Of note here, is that the vast majority of our research participants had very little English language competency upon arrival and a number of participants were not literate in their first language. Indeed, the majority had not studied English prior to being resettled in Wales which meant that most participants were in class levels ranging from pre-entry to entry level 1 (beginner to pre-intermediate level).

The refugees' strong desire to study and improve their language skills was a consistent theme in the interviews, questionnaire responses and focus group discussions. However, there were a number of reasons for the ESOL provision falling short in providing pathways to employment and integration. Issues emerged around the following areas:

The organisation of English language provision

The Home Office recommend that a minimum of eight hours of level appropriate formal ESOL instruction per week is provided to newly settled refugees. While some local authorities were delivering at least eight hours of formal classes per week (and some providing far more), others were able to offer far fewer hours instruction at appropriate levels. There was a marked discrepancy in the number of hours of ESOL offered between areas.

In some cases, there were inconsistencies in the number of hours refugees resettled in the same area were able to access, despite responsibility for their resettlement being assumed by the same local authority area. For example, in one area, men reported accessing around 16 hours per week of ESOL, while women were accessing 0-3 hours per week. In this case, access to childcare was a major barrier to women attending classes. Owing to difficulties travelling from one area to another, refugees resettled in one part of the area, near the college, were accessing 12 hours per week, while those resettled further away were only able to access 1-4 hours per week. Time and again the paucity of ESOL classes was cited as being problematic. The following survey response encapsulates the issue.



The writing in blue is a translation of the Arabic original:
"I do not like that I cannot attend that much classes to learn English because I want to help my kids in their studies. I also want to communicate with people here."

Class cohorts

As in other parts of Wales, some of the areas under study in this report have resettled refugees in towns and villages far from existing ESOL provision and, as a result, are caught in a difficult situation. While there is an urgent need for ESOL classes, it is not cost-effective to commission full-time provision in areas with low learner numbers. On the other hand, neither is it effective to place all the learners in the same classroom when their level of competency differs substantially. This complicates the organisation of effective delivery and adds yet another cost burden. Nevertheless, combining all language learners in the same class was often the only solution to providing, at least some, language instruction.

> *"They are all in the same class and we've got a range of levels because some of them have been here for an additional year and more families are arriving so there is a mix in the class. It's the numbers, it's just not financially viable for the college to put them in separate levels."*
>
> (Excerpt from interview with ESOL manager)

However, grouping all learners together was not only pedagogically unsound, it also caused marked dissatisfaction and even classroom tension among students, as one more competent learner recounted:

> *"Sometimes because there are people of a lower level […] they can't catch up quickly. They need their own very low level. Beginners level, from the letters […] they are struggling, they get angry, the class is tense, believe me, and a few problems happened in the class."*
>
> (Excerpt from interview with SVPRS participant)

Teachers reported difficulties in managing classes comprised of students with vastly different competency levels, and even recounted preparing some students for upcoming assessments while teaching literacy skills to others in the same class:

> *"It's heart-breaking, impossible really, to turn anyone away from a class. But the truth is that having pre-entry level students who can't yet identify the letters of the alphabet in the same classroom as learners at entry level 1 or 2 is a big problem for everybody."*
>
> (Excerpt from interview with ESOL teacher)

ESOL and Employment

Before the arrival of SVPRS participants, none of the Further Education colleges or Community Learning providers in the case study offered vocational ESOL (known as ESOL plus) as part of their suite of provision. Nevertheless, the opportunity to study language in work contexts was a regular theme:

> *"All of the refugees would want a job opportunity where they could work and learn English at the same time."*
>
> (Excerpt from interview with SVPRS caseworker)

> *"I am not happy in school, because it is like an academic course…so we are not young to study academic. We can only we can improve our language in practical situations."*
>
> (Excerpt from interview with SVPRS participant)

One local authority responded to this emergent need by collaborating with a college to create two bespoke vocational courses with integrated ESOL classes. According to one caseworker, the ideal would be the existence of schemes whereby people were able to learn English and work at the same time, commenting that:

> *"I would like to have vocational courses for them as well, for all the ESOL students not just the refugees. [College in another local authority] have hairdressing with ESOL. A lot of my students are desperate to do this sort of thing."*
>
> (Excerpt from interview with SVPRS caseworker)

Formal and Informal language classes

The majority of people on the SVPRS belong to large family units – usually a married couple with three or more children. It is therefore unsurprising to note that many of the adults are middle aged and have been out of formal education for several decades. Indeed, most have long histories of full-time employment. Our research found that men and women alike were keen to access education and meaningful employment. However, several were unhappy at the prospect of spending a long time in a formal classroom environment. Some were disillusioned by the thought of spending hours, and quite possibly years, in class preparing for exams that seemed unrelated to their career aims or progress toward self-sufficiency:

> *"All of the men are over 30, the majority are in their 40s. When you've been working all your life, you are not used to studying in a formal classroom environment…and all of a sudden you're having to do that."*
>
> (Excerpt from interview with resettlement coordinator)

For other learners more informal classes provide a social space where they can improve their language skills without facing the pressure of assessments, tests and so on. Indeed, for some refugees, particularly those with limited experience of formal educational environments, informal study may be a more appropriate learning environment. One interviewee recounted how 'Leila', a fifty-year-old, mother-of-six felt devastated for days after failing her end-of-term ESOL exams:

> *"Leila is a wonderful woman, hugely motivated to learn English—not least so that she might be able to speak with her children and their teachers in English. But she's never been to school. She finds exams too challenging. She's awfully upset."*
>
> (Excerpt from interview with community volunteer)

For some participants, such as the learner described above, it was felt that a less assessment-focussed approach would be far more suitable to her real-life language needs. Indeed, we should mention here the considerable and admirable efforts of the community-based voluntary ESOL programmes which we encountered. Many of whom were delivering the sort of 'conversation-café' language environment that better suited people such as Leila.

Barriers to provision

Two of the biggest barriers to refugees being able to attend ESOL classes were the absence of childcare options (such as creche facilities) and the fact that many of the refugees on the resettlement programme had been rehomed far away from the nearest college.

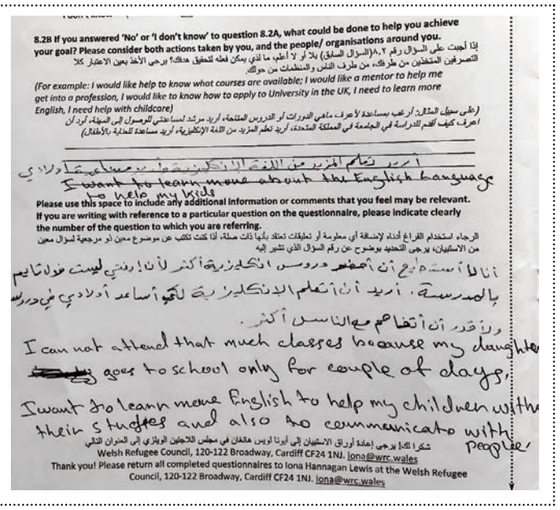
Childcare

Women tended to report lack of childcare provision as a primary barrier to accessing ESOL classes. Some local authorities had secured SVPRS funds to pay for childcare, ensuring that women were able to attend ESOL classes, though this was not the case in all areas. Moreover, there is uncertainty about the sustainability of these solutions once SVPRS funds are no longer available. The following interview exchange exemplifies the situation facing mothers resettled in areas that do not provide for childcare facilities:

1 IHL (interviewer): *What's the problem?*
2 OL: *For babies I cannot go college but for baby.*
3 IHL: *Okay*
4 Interpreter: *It's the problem with the nursery for so the children, there is no fund for the nursery they can't leave their children. […]*
5 Int: *In [one local authority], the council are paying for the nursery*
6 IHL: *So [this local authority] they can't have no money for childcare and [in the other] they do?*
7 Int: *Yes. […]*
8 IHL: *Do all the women have this problem?*
9 *Many voices: Yes, yes.*

(Excerpt from focus group)

As the excerpt shows, not only did a lack of childcare impact women's participation in language learning, but their ensuing low proficiency in English impacted their independence and mobility. The participant in question reported feeling 'stuck in', wanting to travel and use the bus, but unable to communicate with the driver. This experience of isolation is further captured in the following excerpt from a survey (below), in which a participant who cannot attend language classes due to a lack of childcare expresses her frustration at being unable to acquire sufficient language to help her children with their homework, or to communicate with people in her community.



8.2B If you answered 'No' or 'I don't know' to question 8.2A, what could be done to help you achieve your goal? Please consider both actions taken by you, and the people/ organisations around you.
إذا أجبت على السؤال رقم ٨.٢أ (السؤال السابق) بلا أو لا أعلم، ما الذي يمكن فعله لتحقيق هدفك؟ يرجى الأخذ بعين الاعتبار كلاً من التصرفين المتخذين من طرفك، من طرف الناس والمنظمات من حولك.

(For example: I would like help to know what courses are available; I would like a mentor to help me get into a profession, I would like to know how to apply to University in the UK, I need to learn more English, I need help with childcare)
(على سبيل المثال: أرغب بمساعدة لأعرف ماهي الدورات أو الدروس المتاحة؛ أريد مرشد لمساعدتي للوصول إلى المهنة، أود أن أعرف كيف أقدم للدراسة في الجامعة في المملكة المتحدة، أريد تعلم المزيد من اللغة الإنكليزية؛ أريد مساعدة للعناية بالأطفال)

أريد تعلم المزيد من اللغة الإنكليزية من أجل مساعدة أولادي
I want to learn more about the English language to help my kids

Please use this space to include any additional information or comments that you feel may be relevant. If you are writing with reference to a particular question on the questionnaire, please indicate clearly the number of the question to which you are referring.
الرجاء استخدام الفراغ أدناه لإضافة أي معلومة أو تعليقات تعتقد بأنها ذات صلة. أذا كنت تكتب عن موضوع معين أو مرجعية لسؤال معين من الاستبيان، يرجى التحديد بوضوح عن رقم السؤال الذي تشير إليه

أنا لا أستطيع أن أحضر دروس انكليزية أكثر لأن ابنتي ليست طوال اليوم بالمدرسة. أريد أن أتعلم الانكليزية لكي أساعد أولادي في دروسهم وأريد أن أتواصل مع الناس أكثر.

I can not attend that much classes because my daughter goes to school only for couple of days. I want to learn more English to help my children with their studies and also to communicate with people.

شكرا لك! يرجى إعادة أوراق الاستبيان إلى آيونا لويس هانغان في مجلس اللاجئين الويلزي إلى العنوان التالي
Welsh Refugee Council, 120-122 Broadway, Cardiff CF24 1NJ. Iona@wrc.wales
Thank you! Please return all completed questionnaires to Iona Hannagan Lewis at the Welsh Refugee Council, 120-122 Broadway, Cardiff CF24 1NJ. Iona@wrc.wales

Photograph of page from a questionnaire. The Arabic translates as: *"I want to learn more about the English language to help my kids/ I cannot attend that much classes because my daughter goes to school only for a couple of days. I want to learn more English to help my children with their studies and also to communicate with people."*

Travel

In some authority areas where ESOL classes were not available locally, SVPRS funds were being used to pay for travel to classes (including taxis and bus passes). In areas which did not have a large range of ESOL provision in existence prior to SVPRS, we found that refugees would frequently have to travel, sometimes to another local authority area, to access classes. In the following excerpt, one participant explains the cost of travel for himself and his family:

"I give you example. when coming to college we have to <uh> buy a weekly ticket - £14.50 and for one person. If he comes with his wife <uh> £29 a week-weekly. And if they want to come as a family to [xxx], they have to pay as a family ticket £12. This will cost, I'm sure, more than £150 monthly, yeah?"

(Excerpt from focus group participant)

Organisation

Areas which had little or no Welsh Government-funded ESOL infrastructure, for example through a college suite of English language classes, experienced an added difficulty in organising provision. The research revealed confusion on the part of the local authorities as to who held responsibility for devising and initiating a comprehensive programme of ESOL that complied with the expectations outlined in the Home Office SVPRS funding instructions. Interviews with local authority officials in two of the case study areas revealed that they felt unprepared and unsupported with regard to overseeing the language element of the scheme. One of the resettlement officers, concerned about their lack of experience in the field of language education, reflected that:

"It would have been helpful to have someone talk in lay-persons terms about what ESOL is, how it's provided, who provides it, what the accreditation is […]"

(Excerpt from interview with resettlement co-ordinator)

While another official was anxious about the linguistic component of the scheme, explaining that:

"… when we first took families there were no clearly defined expectations about language - How much was enough? How much wasn't enough?"

(Excerpt from interview with resettlement co-ordinator)

Employment skills & Training

Employment histories

As should be expected from a cross section of any society, employment histories, vocational training, skills, experience, and academic qualifications varied greatly between participants in this study. Sectors represented in the employment histories of the refugee research participants included skilled labour (plumbing, stonemasonry, building, gardening); production (factory work, welding, forklift driving); business (shop owners and keepers), and professional work (teaching, managing and architecture). The majority of men on the scheme had been in employment before leaving Syria, as had as a smaller proportion of the women. What was notable from talking to all the stakeholders in the study, was the tremendous eagerness that many had to enter the workplace and earn a living.

Language

Reference to the existence of a 'language barrier' to employment was observed throughout the data. English language proficiency was by far the most oft-cited barrier to securing employment across the sample. Indeed, in every interview and focus group language was raised an issue. The following transcriptions exemplify the issue:

> *"I do not speak English very well."*
>
> *"I need to study the language first…to find a job."*
>
> *"…my language is not that good to help me get a job."*
>
> *"I am still studying ESOL to improve English language."*

Not only did these participants frame language proficiency as a barrier to employment, but as the primary barrier to employment. The reflections were representative across the data. In survey and interview responses where English was framed as a barrier to employment, it was typically framed as the most significant barrier, as one resettlement officer put it:

> *"We come back to the language barrier being the barrier."*
>
> (Excerpt from interview with resettlement co-ordinator)

The reasons for a pilot or surgeon needing highly proficient language skills are obvious. However, the need for advanced level communication skills is less clear in other professions e.g.in the fields of hospitality or skilled labour. Nevertheless, a frequently cited reason for employees needing developed language skills was that limited language proficiency would pose a health and safety risk, as the following example shows:

> *"Amazon came back with a straight no when the jobcentre approached them because of the English. And it's because of health and safety, not that they can't do the job."*
>
> (Excerpt from interview with resettlement co-ordinator)

However, even those refugee research participants who had relatively high levels of English language fluency had struggled to find work. This suggests that, in addition to language, there may be other factors at play which inhibit access to employment for refugees in Wales. This is in line with findings from the Refugee Employment and Skills Study which, following interviews with 454 refugees and asylum seekers in Wales, found language proficiency to have a "significant but not sufficient" impact on rates of refugee employment (Holtom and Iqbal 2020). That is to say that, while linguistic proficiency undoubtedly affects refugees' success in obtaining employment, it is only part of the picture. As one refugee put it:

> *"I don't know what the reason (I haven't got a job). Maybe my language not very perfect. Really I don't know the reason. For now, for lots of people they have problem for language but after they solve this problem they will face another problem. The main problem is language but for me now there's another problem."*
>
> (SVPRS focus group participant)

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE BARRIERS TO EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT FOR FORCED MIGRANTS IN THE CONVERGENCE AREAS OF WALES

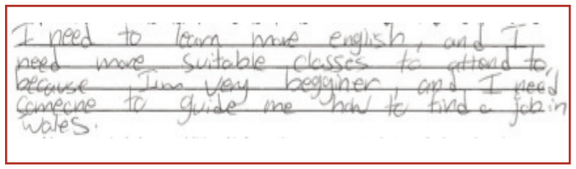
Employment Advice

A lack of help, guidance and support in understanding the culture and processes involved in finding and securing a job was identified as a barrier to gaining employment. The following is from an interview with one SVPRS respondent:

> Researcher: *Who do you feel here in [name of Local Authority] is helping you to find work?*
>
> (Male voice speaking in Arabic)
>
> Interpreter: *Unfortunately, nobody, nobody, not enough support […] also jobcentre said they said it's not our responsibility to find job for you. Find a job then tell us.*
>
> (Excerpt from interview with SVPRS participant)

The text below is a questionnaire response that contains a plea for help from someone who understands the refugees' needs and reads:

"I need to learn more english, and I need more suitable classes to attend to, because I'm very begginer, and I need someone to guide me how to find a job in Wales."



Furthermore, while language proficiency was frequently cited as being a barrier to employment, we found that, in some areas, employment support workers did not appear to be consulting specialist opinion before ascertaining participants' linguistic 'readiness for work'. In some cases, the only employment advice being offered to SVPRS participants was for them to 'improve their English'. In case study areas where there was little ESOL available, as noted above, this advice left the refugees in something of an impasse:

> *"They [employment advisors] say – you have to learn English, you must to learn English."*
>
> (SVPRS focus group participant)

> Researcher: *And what about you are you getting advice?*
>
> Interpreter: *We did have advice I remember with [participant name] yeah but it was at the beginning he didn't settle down well to be able to work and still the language barrier to be honest.*
>
> Researcher: *What was the advice that was given?*
>
> [Arabic]
>
> I: *the most important thing was just the language to be able to work*
> R: *the only advice that's given is language?*
> I: *yes*
> R: *no other advice?*
> I: *no.*
>
> (Excerpt from SVPRS focus group)

'Employment-ready English'?

Despite a general belief among refugee participants, employment advisors, and resettlement scheme co-ordinators that refugee employment outcomes would be improved by their achieving a 'higher' level of English proficiency, there was a notable lack of clarity as to what constituted a 'high', or 'employment-ready' level of English. Furthermore, there was little evidence that screening or diagnostic assessment of linguistic proficiency were being used in, or to inform, employment-advisory encounters. In certain cases, work coaches (in both statutory and third-sector employability organisations) appeared to hold responsibility for deciding when a refugee's level of language was sufficient to be recommended for employment and training. In these cases, advisors were relying on their own judgements, as well as the opinions of caseworkers and interpreters to ascertain refugees' linguistic competency. Of note, there was no evidence that caseworkers and interpreters had received training or were using existing diagnostic assessment models to determine language skills.

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1 MC (researcher): *Mentioned in the meeting was that [advisory staff] are responsible for deciding when [refugees'] English is ready*

2 *but how equipped are they to know when this is the case?*

3 JM: *We are not language teachers.*

4 *We have a conversation with somebody and that conversation then drives the fact of whether that conversation was at a level…*

5 *We have a conversation with the interpreter and [the caseworkers].*

(Excerpt from interview with employment advisor)

Refugees' skills

Advisors' lack of information regarding refugees' levels of English language proficiency reflected a general lack of a systematic approach to gathering information regarding refugee skills within SVPRS. There was no clear indication as to who was responsible for collecting data on refugees' prior education, employment and skills. One interviewee, branch manager for a statutory employment service, described this lack of information as a barrier to providing refugees with appropriate employability advice:

1 MC (researcher): *What, if anything, would you describe as the barriers to setting up what we've talked about – getting the refugees in here with an exact description of what they want to do and what their skills are?*

2 NY: *It needs a collection agent, somebody to collect that data on the basis of someone who is closer to the families and individuals.*

(Excerpt from interview with branch manager statutory employment service)

Responsibility

On the whole, there was a lack of clarity over who is ultimately responsible for supporting SVPRS participants into work. One resettlement scheme co-ordinator reported that they had questioned this several times:

> *"This is the question I've asked time and again, to get them into work whose responsibility is it? That's why I've got an idea of a project where we take someone on full time to work in the jobcentre, working with the refugees to help them sign on, making sure they attend ESOL classes. They'd be like a mentor, working with them to help them find work, they'd approach companies, get them onto courses."*
>
> (Excerpt from interview with SVPRS coordinator)

The general implication from the above is that there is a lack of clarity as to which person or service is accountable for supporting refugees to access education and employment. This frustration was found across the study areas with another resettlement co-ordinator lamenting the fact that:

> *"Work experience / Work trial schemes could be used - but is no-one taking a lead"*
>
> (Excerpt from interview with SVPRS coordinator)

In some local authorities, responsibility had been assumed by an allocated Single Point of Contact (SPOC) at the area's Jobcentre Plus. SPOCs were being used for the SVPRS participants in three of the areas that we studied. One SPOC, whose remit coverered rural areas, reported a sense of lacking the specialist networks to be able to adequately support the VPRS participants:

> *"I'm at the point now of saying well I don't know where else to go to I have no idea, I've tried Googling […] so it's that kind of thing which [VPRS participants are] finding frustrating and I'm finding frustrating as well, the real expert knowledge […] is much more easy to find in a big city : London, Manchester, which deal with [refugees in] much higher numbers but, rural Wales? I have no idea."*
>
> (Excerpt from interview with SPOC)

However, the experience above contrasts with that of a Job Centre in another case study area. There, the SPOC reported strong professional networks with local employers and links with employment and migrant support organisations. The region had also implemented a steering group at senior management level within the Department for Work and Pensions.

Collaboration

As indicated above, some local authority areas had initiated a steering group to support participants into employment, and reported strong collaboration between Jobcentre plus, FE colleges, Communities for Work, ESOL providers, and third-sector migrant support services. However, in some local authorities, there was an absence of coordination between these bodies. Without such partnerships, the ensuing lack of communication meant that support staff were often left unaware of the skills and aspirations of SVPRS participants, and as such were ill-equipped to offer employment-related support. Reflecting on one such steering group meeting, a respondent noted:

> *"That [meeting] was the forum by which we can exchange information on job skills, aspirations, language levels and readiness for employment. Everybody around that table had an interest (and) those present should now go forward as a working group."*
>
> (Excerpt from interview with Jobcentre employee)

Certification

There are several issues surrounding evidencing work-place qualifications. Firstly, UK employers often do not recognise qualifications or certificates from other countries. Secondly, many SVPRS participants may have never obtained certificates to evidence their educational or workplace achievements. Finally, for refugees fleeing, for example, civil war or persecution, any qualifications gained may have been lost, destroyed, or be otherwise unobtainable. Thus, the issue is more complex than a need for employers to recognise overseas qualifications. Rather, it is an issue of recognising the skills and achievements of those who may not hold tangible evidence of their prior experience.

Physical and mental health

A final, notable barrier to employment and training is that of poor physical and mental health. The topic of health is a distinct field of its own, with considerable scholarship dedicated to the particular health risks, needs, and barriers to care faced by people in a forced migration context (e.g. see Ager 2014). Refugees may be selected for resettlement under the Vulnerable Persons' Resettlement Scheme on the basis of their having been survivors of torture or violence, or owing to their medical health needs (from an internal UNHCR document, reproduced in Bolt 2018: 46). Unsurprisingly, therefore, refugees are typically considered to experience relatively poor health both prior to and post-settlement, compared to people who migrate principally for economic reasons. The Welsh Assembly Government adopted the Social Model for Disability in 2002, which *"makes an important distinction between 'impairment' and 'disability'. It recognises that people with impairments are disabled by barriers that commonly exist in society. These barriers include negative attitudes, and physical and organisational barriers, which can prevent disabled people's inclusion and participation in all walks of life"* (Welsh Government 2019b: 7-8). In the context of the numerous barriers faced by refugees accessing training and employment, further attention could be given to the impact of refugees' mental and physical health on employment outcomes in Wales, and on whether caseworkers, employers, and employment advisors are active proponents of the Social Model of Disability.

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Concluding Remarks

Missed Opportunities

Various work support schemes, initiatives, placements and programmes already exist in Wales to help people into education, employment or training. However, one of the predominant themes of this research is that SVPRS participants are frequently missing out on such opportunities, particularly in areas new to refugee resettlement. There appear to be two main reasons for this. Firstly, even when they have the right to access opportunities for development, refugees report being unaware of the support available to them, and do not have the networks (either social or professional) to learn about such support. Secondly, education and employment professionals report that they are unprepared and lack the specialist knowledge to adequately support SVPRS participants' needs and are encountering issues in their caseloads which are, for them, without precedence. These include: recognition of qualifications or experience obtained overseas; skills in supporting people for whom English and Welsh are not first languages; awareness of immigration and asylum policy; and skills in supporting people with complex mental and physical health needs, including injuries caused by torture, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Moreover, research and policy which foregrounds language learning as the predominant barrier to employment shifts the burden of responsibility for gaining employment largely onto the shoulders of the refugees – a vulnerable group of people – and risks ignoring other factors which may be at play (e.g. discrimination, lack of access to appropriate training). In the context of the recent re-emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, and increasing awareness of structural, cultural and institutional barriers to equality for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities, we urge policy makers to commission research which examines, in detail, what these other factors may be. Furthermore, we consider that it is also necessary to investigate the kinds of employment that are being accessed by refugees in Wales and to ask to what extent are refugees able to access secure employment and fair working conditions in Wales.

Discrimination and Exploitation

It is clear that refugees face significant barriers to fair, secure work in Wales and the United Kingdom. Not only are they disadvantaged by the aforementioned barriers of a lack of qualifications, access to training, work-limiting health conditions, and so on, they also encounter the significant structural barrier of being perceived to be less skilled than they are. The experiences of our refugee sample shows that this perception of unpreparedness has led some work coaches to recommend that refugees pursue employment in roles not only well below their level of skill and experience, but also in which they will be vulnerable to potentially exploitative labour conditions (Hannagan Lewis 2019: 100-130). This may be due to their willingness to accept harsh labour conditions because of the limited range of employment options available to them. It may also be due to the large number of job possibilities at the 'low end of the labour market', employment which is typically insecure and underpaid (if not exploitative) (MacKenzie and Forde 2009; Lewis et al 2015: 4).

Endnote

In conducting this study, we encountered numerous grassroots initiatives, combining to foster a culture of welcome and togetherness. In many cases, volunteer organisations have stepped in to fill gaps in provision. Examples of voluntary schemes include befriending initiatives; English and Welsh classes; community dinners, and fundraisers. Such initiatives can provide an invaluable lifeline and are examples of the two-way nature of integration. We feel that the considerable efforts of community activists in creating a culture of welcome and of providing vital integrative services should be recognised and applauded. Nevertheless, community organising should not be taken for granted, nor should initiatives, such as ESOL classes delivered by volunteers, be seen as sufficient to fill gaps caused by the absence of government-funded learning and employability schemes.

Finally, to truly work towards building an inclusive Wales, and UK, we must radically shift how we think about language. As well as ensuring access to language classes that acknowledge (rather than erase) linguistic diversity, so too must we promote the notion that we can all 'fit in' whatever our linguistic habits. The celebration of linguistic diversity is key to the process of building a wide and inclusive understanding of 'us'. It is only from this starting point that we can work to ensure that all – regardless of ethnicity, ability, gender identity or migration status – have access to the safety and security of belonging.

Recommendations

Specialist Education / Employment Coordinators

There is a need for a specialist advice service (or services) tasked with offering appropriate educational and employment guidance for refugee participants on resettlement schemes such as the SVPRS. Indeed, such a facility should be made available to refugees resettled in all parts of Wales. The service should collaborate closely with the existing employability sector (including private, voluntary, and mandated provision), and work to increase refugee access to participation in mainstream provision, where appropriate. Such a service would gather data relating to the skills, aspirations, and work expectations of the participants. Beneficiaries would be supported in identifying various courses and qualifications required for entry into their desired field. Such coordinators would also be able to direct participants to appropriate language education courses and/or further and higher education courses.

Development of ESOL Provision

The Welsh Government's Nation of Sanctuary, Refugee and Asylum Seeker Plan (2019a) recognises the importance effective language education plays in promoting integration. Nevertheless, ESOL provision is still inadequate across Wales, especially outside of the dispersal cities. The transition to teaching online during COVID-19 has demonstrated how digital pedagogy can be used to help reach those unable to attend college classes. It therefore seems timely to call for a revision of the Welsh Government's ESOL policy. Not only should the possibilities of remote learning be explored, as a means of widening access to ESOL provision, but more informal, participatory forms of learning should be investigated with relation to the real-life language needs of adult forced migrants. Providing support for participatory ESOL classes, included as part of a suite of English language provision, would mitigate some of the anxieties expressed by the participants on the SVPRS. For example, having greater agency in the classroom might well assuage the concerns participants reported about feeling as if they were in school once again. Released from the constraints of a formal syllabus, classes would have more freedom to focus on issues that matter most to the participants—such as discussing employment-based topics, communicating with schools or understanding welfare system processes. For mothers with children, such an approach might well be possible to enact in a family learning environment, with no pressure of preparing for exams or tests. Perhaps more pertinently, expecting adult learners, unused to formal educational settings, to attend five or more years of classroom-based instruction in their attempt to achieve proficiency is unrealistic. New models need to be tried in which learners are given greater agency to pursue integration routes that are more closely related to their needs, abilities and expectations.

Development of Employment Opportunities for Migrants and Second Language English/ Welsh Speakers

We recommend that the Welsh Government work with employers to identify opportunities for placements and work experience across a variety of sectors. In addition, we recommend embedding language learning in the workplace, for example, by providing funding for employers to offer in-work bespoke English or Welsh courses. In areas with high concentrations of Welsh language speakers, we recommend that employers be required to demonstrate flexibility in the implementation of the Welsh Language Act for applicants with protected characteristics (e.g. minority ethnic applicants), thus ensuring that forced migrants are not disadvantaged in seeking public sector employment through a lack of Welsh language proficiency.

Development of Existing Networks/ Infrastructure

Professionals in the fields of education and employment spoke of the potential benefits of forming a pan-Wales/ pan-UK working group to manage into-work provision for the SVPRS participants. We recommend that such networks be strengthened and encouraged, and that professional development be provided to those involved in supporting forced migrants into education and employment. Training could include: recognising skills and qualifications obtained abroad; awareness training on xenophobia and race-based discrimination in the workplace; improved networking with migrant support organisations able to offer advice on matters relating to immigration law and policy; and closer collaboration with colleges for advice on language courses and assessment. Moreover, reporting procedures should be put into place so that data can be collected and awareness raised about this particularly vulnerable group.

Experts by Experience Steering Group

In order to improve migrant visibility and leadership across all levels of governance in Wales, we recommend the establishment of a steering group of people from a forced migrant background (experts by experience), tasked with the reviewing, shaping, and accountability of policies which relate to migrants' labour market integration in Wales.

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Further Information

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Iona Hannagan Lewis
Researcher and KESS2 Scholar
Welsh Refugee Council / University of South Wales
iona.hannagan-lewis@gov.wales

Dr Mike Chick
Senior Lecturer - TESOL
University of South Wales
Mike.chick@southwales.ac.uk

Andrea Cleaver
Chief Executive Officer
Welsh Refugee Council
andrea@wrc.wales

For information on **KESS2**, please visit **www.kess2.ac.uk**

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