



Refugee Qualification Equivalence: Improving Integration through Skills Recognition

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Abstract

This paper outlines a strategy to improve upon formal and informal recognition of qualifications held by refugees entering the UK. It begins with an overview of UK NARIC, the national body responsible for producing equivalence qualifications. This is followed by discussion of the problem of refugees who lack physical evidence of their qualifications upon arrival. We then turn to the problem of language acquisition, before finally considering official channels of support for refugees as they use their equivalence qualifications to seek employment.

In our conclusion, we produce a series of proposals directed towards NARIC and other organisations. These include the introduction of an assessment-based qualification recognition process; a model integrating employment with language learning; and the supplementation of NARIC's role through government-supported initiatives for job-seeking refugees across a range of areas.

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Introduction

In this paper, we outline a strategy to improve upon formal recognition of skills held by refugees entering the UK. More specifically, the paper is concerned with optimising the mechanisms by which academic qualifications held by UK-resettled refugees are ascribed their proper value. We extend this proposal in the belief that giving better recognition to the pre-existing skills of refugees will serve to increase their employment opportunities and their wider social integration.

Our proposal comes broadly in response to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Syria, and the commitment made by the British government to accept 20,000 Syrian refugees from 2015 to 2020 (Prime Minister's Office 2015). This commitment relates to our proposal in two important ways. Firstly, it represents a considerable growth in the number of refugees resettled annually by the government. Taking into account both successful asylum applications and refugees accepted through the UNHCR Gateway Protection Programme (up to 750 per year), refugee intake has fluctuated between 8,000 and 12,000 annually over the last decade (National Statistics 2015). The addition of 4,000 refugees per annum therefore constitutes a major increase, and it is important that the infrastructure designed to aid refugee integration be made sufficiently robust for the rising numbers.

Secondly, the British pledge is much lower than the commitments made by many other western governments – for instance, Canada welcomed 25,000 refugees within four months in late 2015 and early 2016 (UNHCR 2015), while Germany accepted between 800,000 and 1 million refugees in 2015 (Bundesregierung 2015). The writers of this paper believe that the UK is capable of offering a far further-reaching humanitarian response, and that the best way of proving this capability in the long term is by ensuring that the refugees are given the right conditions to make valuable social and economic contributions to this country.

Qualification recognition

What, then, is qualification recognition, and why is it important? Qualification recognition is the process by which academic qualifications attained in one country are ascribed an equivalence value in a second country. Depending upon an immigrant's country of origin, it may not be important to attain a certificate of equivalence, as in many sectors there is no formal legal requirement that an employee hold a particular type of qualification. For instance, there is no

formal regulation in the UK governing the certification requirements of software engineers; provided that someone can demonstrate that they have the necessary skills, they do not (in principle) need to hold any degree whatsoever, let alone a British degree. Even in some professions which are centrally regulated, such as medical science, immigrants from within the EU are exempt from sitting national accreditation examinations (European Parliament and Council 2005).

However, reports indicate that formal qualification equivalence procedures are ‘highly valued by employers and are associated with better labour-market outcomes’ (OECD 2014: 39). It stands to reason that qualifications conferred in countries with less familiar academic standards – non-English-speaking countries outside the EU – are those most in need of equivalence recognition, and the vast majority of refugees, including Syrian refugees, fall into this category. For them, it is an uphill battle to secure employment commensurate with their educational level; many find themselves in jobs for which they are over-qualified, while many do not find jobs at all. An OECD report on economic migrants in the EU from 2014 makes the following observation:

The picture for family and humanitarian migrants remains a depressing one: low employment and high overqualification rates at arrival and shortly thereafter, some progress in employment rates but not enough and little improvement with regard to overqualification. (OECD/European Union 2014: 371)

Given that high rates of unemployment are coupled with high rates of over-qualification among refugees (or ‘humanitarian migrants’), it is clear that this is not simply a case of refugees lacking the requisite skills; rather, there is a systemic problem at the level of qualification recognition. Either employers are unable to recognise the degree certificates that refugee job applicants are showing them, or refugees lack confidence in the employment system and are shying away from jobs for which they are qualified.

A qualification equivalence system which works for refugees should bridge this gap of ignorance and suspicion, both giving refugees the confidence to apply for employment appropriate to their skill set, and giving employers the means to recognise the value of their qualifications. But if we take the proportion of refugees who are over-qualified for their employment as the yardstick for such a system, then the UK fails the test. A 2010 study showed that over half of the refugees in employment after 21 months of residence in the UK felt that they were over-qualified; the

proportion was higher still for refugees with degrees, and the statistics excluded the many who were unemployed (Cebulla et al 2010: iii). Furthermore, there is well-documented anecdotal evidence of the frustrations of qualified refugees employed in low-skilled labour: a 2011 report compiled by the Regional Refugee Forum North East, entitled ‘Skilled’, contains testimonials from 33 such refugees living in north-eastern England (Fletcher 2011: Appendix 1). Among them were an Iranian microbiologist who was working in a restaurant at the time of publication, a Kurdish accountant who was working as a bilingual teaching assistant, a Bosnian vet working as a refugee case worker and a Sudanese mechanical engineer who was still unemployed after five years.

Paper overview

This paper seeks to highlight the UK’s widespread failure to leverage the skills of refugees as a tool in their own successful integration, and offers recommendations as to how we might go about reforming the existing system. With these purposes in mind, we have divided our paper into four distinct chapters. We begin with an overview of UK NARIC, the body responsible for producing equivalence qualifications in the UK. This is followed by discussion of the problem of refugees who lack physical evidence of their qualifications upon arrival. We then turn to the problem of language acquisition, a major bottleneck for skilled refugees adapting to a new environment. Finally, we consider the last, practical hurdle for equivalence qualifications: ensuring that refugees are given the support they need to get value out of their statements of comparability in seeking employment. These areas are identified in the literature as priorities for ensuring that refugees are given the best possible opportunities to find work appropriate to their skills (Platts-Fowler et al 2011: 15). At a time when UK NARIC is working with other European equivalence agencies to reassess its organisational structure (NARIC 2016), we hope that our observations will provide insight for those unfamiliar with the existing approach to refugee qualifications, and will help shape the emerging debate as to how it should evolve.

UK NARIC

The United Kingdom's policy for qualification recognition has repeatedly evolved since the 1980s and the country can now be considered a European leader in the recognition of formal, informal and non-formal qualifications. That said, given the current refugee crisis and predicted migration trends, there can be no doubt that the system in place will be subjected to considerable strain. Accordingly, it is important that the existing methods for the recognition of the skills of refugees and asylum seekers be examined meticulously. The first step is to provide a clear and complete history of the current system, which has become a complex arrangement of several different bodies.

Definitions

As a preliminary to this evaluation, some definitions are required. Accreditation of prior certificated learning (APCL) is 'the identification, assessment and formal acknowledgement of learning and achievement that occurred at some time in the past prior to entry to a course of study, and for which the learner was awarded some form of official recognition' (QAA 2012). For example, this may include: certificated learning from UK educational institutions, certificated learning from abroad and certificated work-based learning (IOM, 2013). Recognition of prior learning (RPL) means 'taking account of previous learning that has occurred in any of a range of contexts including school, college and university, and/or through life and work experiences. Once recognised through this process, prior learning can be used to gain credit or exemption for qualifications and/or personal and career development' (QAA 2012). Finally, overqualification, the problem which this paper seeks to address, 'refers to the situation where a person has a level of skill or education higher than is required for his or her job' (IOM 2013).

History

Within a European context, the UK can be considered a relative anomaly in that the majority of professions are unregulated. This has meant that the system of qualification accreditation has evolved into one that is more flexible than many other European countries. In 1987 the first meaningful steps were made towards a formal system of skills recognition with National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs). These helped to promote Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) in the further education sector

and to establish a system of qualification classifications in line with their level and occupational sector (Lester 2011: 205-216). The emphasis on recognition of all types of learning is exemplified by the NVQ and SVQ system for accrediting non-formal learning, such as on the job learning. In the 1990s this system was revised and updated, becoming the National Qualifications Framework. At the same time, regional schemes for credit and recognition emerged in areas such as London and eastern England, but without a national scheme developing for England (Leney & Ponton 2007).

Different sectors of the economy developed their own ways of recognising skills. Part of this was through Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) which are involved in developing occupational standards for vocational training, identifying market needs and highlighting groups of employees with a priority for recognition (IOM 2013). Until 2008 the SSCs were monitored by the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA), however this was replaced with the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) and the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils comprising all 25 SSCs. These work together with industry sector bodies and organisations in order to develop NVQs under the National Qualifications Framework and have made significant contributions to shaping accreditation attitudes and policy since the early 2000s (Hawley 2010).

In 2008 NVQs and SVQs were replaced with the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) which is a credit transfer system. This system allows individuals to work towards a complete qualification that is recognised as the standard for participating in a particular sector in the UK labour market. UK NARIC is a private sector company that has been operating on a not-for-profit basis since 2014. It is the designated national agency for the recognition and comparison of international qualifications, skills and formal learning in the United Kingdom. It performs this official function on behalf of the UK Government (UK NARIC 2016a). Although these services are ones which refugees must use if they are to be able to participate in the UK economy at an appropriate level for their skill set, they are by no means specifically designated for humanitarian migrants. Prior to 2011, the Refugee Integration and Employment Service (RIES) was a national programme which had been set up to help refugees through the process of qualification recognition. However, this programme was scrapped due to budget cuts. As a consequence, there is currently no comprehensive employment support available to refugees.

UK NARIC

In this evaluation, we focus on improving the recognition of formal learning for refugees through UK NARIC. The most commonly used service provided by NARIC is the provision of a Statement of Comparability (SoC). This document provides confirmation of the comparable level of a qualification only; it does not compare the grades obtained (Gov, 2016). The cost of the service is £55.20 and is estimated to take between 10 and 15 working days (UK NARIC 2016a). The company runs and updates six databases of vocational, academic and professional qualifications as well as teaching, childcare and social comparisons from over 190 countries worldwide. As the national agency, managed on behalf of the UK Government, it is the only official source of information on international qualifications for organisations recruiting from overseas and to individuals wishing to work or study in the UK (UK NARIC 2011). The system is both transparent and flexible since it focuses on the evaluation of learning outcomes achieved rather than the path to achievement. It is this outcome-based approach which facilitates the incorporation of lifelong learning into skills and qualifications comparisons. Qualifications are assessed and processed using a band framework. In 2010 this was reduced from 18 to 16 bands, ranging from entry level to Band 15, which is post-doctoral or equivalent. This system is used in order to enable businesses and organisations – such as universities and employers – to differentiate types and levels of awards.

For general qualification recognition and comparison UK NARIC has been commended for its methodology and approach. Finland, for example, developed its NOSTE system for recognition of vocational skills on the UK NARIC model. However, the organisation has itself acknowledged areas where improvement is possible and some recent attempts to streamline the process have been unsuccessful. Furthermore, while UK NARIC is the main body for formal recognition, it is often up to professional bodies, employers and universities to validate the results (IOM 2013). Complications are particularly common in the case of refugees because of the difficulty of obtaining sufficient evidence, in the form of certificates and specific documents, from individuals who have had to leave their homes in desperate circumstances. This issue is further compounded in the case of non-formal and informal recognition because of the more fragmented procedure and the lack of a common national policy. Indeed, it is important to understand the four devolved regions of the UK (England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland) often apply different practices to the recognition of qualifications (even if qualifications accredited in one region are generally accepted in another).

The broadly good practice of UK NARIC is let down by serious issues concerning the provision of support for refugees. Despite the closure of RIES there are other organisations offering assistance to refugees, albeit without an official national mandate. Moreover, input and support comes from several different ministries including the Department for Education, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, highlighting the further problem that no single government body has clear responsibility for the accreditation of refugee qualifications. In order to improve efficiency this issue must be addressed. Alongside this, UK NARIC cooperates extensively with regulatory bodies, such as professional associations. For the refugees themselves, the Refugee Education and Training Advisory Service (RETAS) is a non-profit initiative that places an emphasis on the accreditation for female refugees; the Council for At-Risk Academics (CARA) provides help to teachers and academics; and the Refugee Council offers support in individual cases. There is substantial anecdotal evidence of the Refugee Council giving assistance to refugees seeking to enter skilled employment (Refugee Council 2014).

This is particularly true of the 102 regulated industries in the UK (largely in healthcare) where the clearly designed procedures, established to ensure the maintenance of professional standards, challenge the ability of refugees to practise. Some regulated professions have harmonisation of basic training in all EU member states. For instance, this exists for dental practitioners, doctors and general practitioners, midwives, general care nurses, pharmacists, veterinary surgeons and architects. The automatic recognition of qualifications is granted through specific professional associations (such as the General Dental Council, General Medical Council and Architects Registration Board) (UK NCP 2012). The engineering sector also has a number of mutual agreements on recognition of qualifications. For instance, the Engineering Council participates in Washington, Sydney and Dublin Accords. For non-regulated industries qualification recognition is effectively at the discretion of employers, which leads to a problem of awareness. The Refugee Council has been successful at providing a network between employers and refugees but there is still evidence that many employers are unaware of UK NARIC and are oblivious to the legitimacy of a NARIC SoC.

The current provision of help and awareness specifically for refugees on a national scale is severely lacking, as is information for refugees who do not have full documentation of their qualifications. Besides improvements to the system for accreditation, it is evident that accessibility must also be developed. The process itself should be made easier, clearer and less daunting for refugees. At the same time refugees should be made aware of the benefits of qualification recognition and targeted assistance should be made freely available (Bloch 2002). The UK has rightly been praised for its overall approach to skills recognition; the blurred distinction between formal, informal and non-formal learning has created a relatively flexible system for most migrants. UK NARIC should ensure that refugees are offered the same flexibility, in order to optimise their chances for successful integration into British life.

Recognising undocumented qualifications

Non-Europeans in a European system

Having considered UK NARIC in the previous chapter, we now turn to a closer examination of problems faced by refugees in having their qualifications recognised. By way of introduction, it is worth drawing attention to the broader context in which NARIC was established. The European Network of Information Centres (ENIC) was created by the Council of Europe in collaboration with UNESCO in 1994, and was a key player both in the 1997 Lisbon Recognition Convention and the Bologna Process, standardising higher education qualifications across the European Higher Education Area. NARIC emerged later as a counterpart initiative run by the European Commission, and adopted a joint charter with ENIC in 2004 (Council of Europe 2014). We highlight this to show that ENIC-NARIC was created as part of a *European* project of qualification equivalence, with close links to the Bologna Process. NARIC was designed to process the qualifications of Europeans, not of refugees. This has led to deep incompatibilities between the design of its organisational structure and the rising numbers of resettled refugees who try to use it.

We examine these incompatibilities firstly from the refugee perspective. There is good research-based evidence to suggest that refugees are struggling at the level of qualification recognition, and that this is having adverse knock-on effects for their employment prospects and wider social integration (Community Links and Refugee Council 2011: 16; Mulvey 2013: 70-71; Pettitt 2013: 68). These failures risk being further exposed over the next five years, with the absorption of 4,000 Syrian refugees annually until 2020. Syrians are well educated: in 2013, enrolment in higher education reached 34.5 per cent in Syria, having grown steadily over the preceding decade (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2016). The top five UK refugee-producing countries in 2015 were (in descending order) Sudan, Syria, Iran, Eritrea and Pakistan (Refugee Council 2016a); of these, only Iran has higher tertiary education attainment than Syria. It is therefore to be expected that the arrival of disproportionately highly qualified individuals in large numbers will place considerable strain on attempts to integrate refugees into appropriate employment. According to one OECD report, it's a strain that must be catered for, with warnings that the 'failure to find work will increase the fiscal cost associated with welcoming refugees' and appeals to a 'comprehensive policy response [...] to foster the labour market integration of refugees' (OECD 2015: 4).

On the refugee side, there are qualification recognition problems leading to broader employment concerns, and there is a growing urgency to address both of these. So what is going wrong on the organisational side? Several aspects of NARIC's organisational structure merit further examination, but given the scope of this paper, we address only one issue: provisions for refugees lacking documentation of their qualifications. Refugees, many of whom have urgently fled conditions of extreme violence in their countries of origin, often lack evidence of former qualifications when they arrive in the UK. The problem is clearly illustrated by a professional musician who arrived in 2003 from the Democratic Republic of the Congo: 'I have degrees in Jazz, Classical, Vocal Harmony and Music Arrangement. When I had to come to the UK, I wanted to try to teach music, but language was a barrier, I couldn't produce my diplomas, I didn't bring them with me when I fled, and I wasn't allowed to work.' (Fletcher 2011: Appendix 1). Accounts like this are commonplace: missing documentation is a well-established problem in refugee skills recognition (Dumont 2015: 13), and one which NARIC must address.

UK NARIC provisions for undocumented qualifications

Despite requirements in the Lisbon Recognition Convention that parties develop procedures to fairly assess refugee qualifications, even when these 'cannot be proven through documentary evidence', few parties to the Convention have done so (CRQHEER 1997: Article VII; European Parliament and Council 2011: Article 28(2)). In fact, it appears that this hole in equivalence frameworks has only recently started to garner wide attention. Following the 7th Meeting of the Lisbon Recognition Convention in late February 2016, ENIC-NARIC released a brochure entitled *Recognition of Qualification Holders without Documentation* (ENIC-NARIC 2016), based on their 2012 *European Area of Recognition Manual* (NUFFIC 2012: 52–54). In it, they directly address higher education institutions processing refugee applications for further study, rather than addressing national ENIC-NARIC bodies themselves. They suggest that higher education institutions should permit refugees without documentation to submit a 'background paper', reconstructing the applicant's academic achievements. They are then to assess the qualifications against a series of metrics, before passing the applicant on to an evaluation procedure, which may include tests using existing entrance examinations and interviews with admissions officers.

While this statement provides welcome encouragement for the support of qualified refugees without documentation, it is too narrow in its scope. By pushing the problem onto the higher education institutions, ENIC-NARIC avoids taking responsibility for an issue which should fall

within their remit as the official body for qualification equivalence. The failure is on two fronts: firstly, ENIC-NARIC neglects this recognition problem from the perspective of employers, and secondly, even in higher education, ENIC-NARIC minimises the plausibility of successful outcomes by forcing individual institutions to make sense of foreign credentials themselves. Proposing to outsource the most difficult cases of qualification assessment to organisations without any expertise in these matters is not an adequate long-term solution.

This gives an indication of the limited progress made by ENIC-NARIC on this front, but what of UK NARIC in particular? An ad-hoc query passed to the European Migration Network in January 2016 required Network members to give an account of ‘alternative recognition procedures’ in place on a national level for refugees without documentation (European Migration Network 2016). In its response, UK NARIC responded that there was no alternative recognition procedure in place. It did however cite its work with the Refugee Council and other bodies on ‘establishing qualifications in medical and other regulated professions, even when the individuals have no documents’.

The most successful project on this front is the NHS *Building Bridges Programme*, a collaboration between the Refugee Council, the Refugee Advice and Guidance Unit, and Glowing Results (a language tuition service). From September 2014 to August 2015, the programme provided information and guidance to 68 refugee health professionals, and aided 12 refugees to become qualified doctors practising with the NHS (NHS 2015). However, it isn’t clear how UK NARIC could play anything more than a peripheral role in this process (perhaps through their English Language Assessment service). For those refugees able to produce acceptable overseas medical qualifications, they can progress directly to the Professional and Linguistic Assessments Board (PLAB) tests, at which point the three collaborating organisations step in to help prepare applicants. Once they have passed these tests, they are able to apply for registration with a licence to practise in the UK. Only in the case of refugees who are unable to produce evidence of an acceptable overseas medical qualification could NARIC have a role to play. Yet judging by the experience of at least one beneficiary of the Building Bridges Programme, refugees in this position are required to re-sit primary medical qualification over several years before taking the PLAB (Refugee Council 2016b). This would suggest that NARIC is not offering degree equivalence in the cases where it would have the greatest impact.

Alternative approaches to recognition of undocumented qualifications

Statements provided by other national agencies in response to the European Migration Network query indicate that there is more that can be done. For instance, the Dutch counterpart to UK NARIC, called ‘EP-Nuffic’, has provided an ‘indication of education level’ (*Indicatie Onderwijsniveau*, or ION) service alongside its ordinary credential evaluation service since 2015 (IDW 2016). The procedure is free of charge and is exclusively available to beneficiaries of international protection. It closely resembles the background paper model discussed above, but improves upon it by assigning responsibility to EP-Nuffic for processing the application. Successful applicants receive a certificate with an indication of their level of competence, and a statement about the absence of official diplomas. The adoption of this procedure would represent a significant advance on the limited existing frameworks in the UK.

Another successful strategy in this area has been developed by NOKUT, Norway’s qualification equivalence agency (NOKUT 2015). Their UVD-procedure (*uten verifiserbar dokumentasjon*, or ‘without verifiable documentation’) acts as a failsafe for ordinary equivalence applications which are rejected on the basis of missing documentation. Candidates whose professed language skills and qualifications fulfil the formal requirements for qualification recognition are invited to interview with a panel of experts (two academics, one NOKUT representative), and also complete written examinations. NOKUT passes a decision on recognition based on the report given by the panel. Crucially, the recognition documents issued at the end of the process are the *same* as those issued in ordinary recognition cases. In this respect, it builds on the Dutch framework, by offering applicants a fully-fledged equivalence qualification.

Finally, Germany too makes allowance for refugees without documented qualifications. According to the 2012 Federal Recognition Act, if an applicant cannot submit all of the relevant documentation in seeking qualification equivalence, the competent body may apply ‘other suitable procedures’ in order to determine the professional skills of the applicant (Professional Qualifications Assessment Act 2012: Section 14). This alternative approach is referred to as ‘Prototyping transfer’, and involves similar procedures to those described above: skills analysis of candidates through special interviews and work sampling (Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training 2015). The procedure works closely with a number of professional associations, helping to link the equivalence qualifications directly with employment. Most importantly, the wide-reaching Federal Recognition Act, with its stated purpose of ensuring that

qualified immigrants ‘can find work commensurate with those qualifications on the German labour market’, sends an important positive message to refugees and employers alike about the value of the skills that they bring with them.

Proposals

The procedures discussed above should serve as a basis for changes to the way the UK deals with undocumented qualifications. In particular, we make the following proposals:

Assessment-based recognition of qualifications. UK NARIC has already begun collaborating with NOKUT to establish the ‘European Qualification Passport for Refugees’, a plan to develop a Europe-wide fast-track for qualification equivalence (UK NARIC 2016b); it should also be borrowing from NOKUT’s successful UVD-procedure and from EP-Nuffic’s ION to ensure qualified refugees have access to equivalence procedures, with or without their documentation.

Official recognition of alternative equivalence procedures. The introduction of positive legislation following the model set by the 2012 Federal Recognition Act would allow for alternative methods of qualification recognition in key areas. This would send a strong positive message to refugees (that their skills are valued), and to employers (that proof of qualification is not the only means of demonstrating skills).

By these measures, Britain stands to significantly improve the standard of refugee access to employment and higher education, and the standard of integration more broadly.

Accreditation and language learning

There are many flaws with the current system of English language tuition for refugees in the UK. These include, but are not limited to, accessibility, teaching technique and costs for refugees. It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss all of them. Instead we will suggest ways to bring employment and language learning closer together.

Current system

UK NARIC states on its website: ‘English is the main language of the United Kingdom. The ability to speak English to a competent level is essential to ensure successful integration and progression in the UK’ (UK NARIC 2016c). Unlike many other migrants, refugees do not need to meet specific English language requirements before arrival (Refugee Council 2011: 2). Recent research found that approximately half of refugees surveyed had qualifications and were more likely to speak English than not (Daniel et al 2010).

Language acquisition and accreditation of foreign qualifications are important steps many refugees must take to find employment in the UK. There is no institution or body that caters to both: since the abolition of the Refugee Integration and Employment Service (RIES) in September 2011, there has been no nationwide co-ordinated service available to support new refugees. UK NARIC does not provide English language tuition to refugees. It does, however, provide an English Language Assessment service, which issues an assessment and a statement. Migrants and refugees complete the assessment in order to (a) confirm that their English language proficiency meets a specified level (e.g. Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) levels A1, A2, B1, B2 or C1), or (b) confirm for applications to work, study, or register with a professional body that an international academic qualification deemed comparable to a UK BA, MA or PhD is taught in English to the standard of CEFR B1, B2 or C1. The service costs £55.20, including VAT. Alternatively, the Fast Track Service costs £196.80 for a 24-hour service (UK NARIC 2016c).

Refugee Doctors looking to work in the UK have to pass a number of exams as well as taking placements to familiarise themselves with the UK healthcare system. Stages to re-qualify include 3 language assessments (UK NARIC 2016c):

1. IELTS (International English Language Test System) exam: £135.
2. PLAB (Professional and Linguistic Assessment Board) exam part 1: £145.
3. PLAB exam part 2: £430.

The Refugee Council can support doctors by offering the following (UK NARIC 2016c.):

1. Six-week courses to prepare for PLAB part 1 and 2.
2. 10-week access to a skills lab to practice using medical equipment.
3. Medical-focused language and communications support.
4. Job search and interview support.

For language acquisition not specific to a particular profession, a range of organisations provide ESOL services (English for Speakers of Other Languages) regionally. *Refugee Action*, *Horton Housing* and *Refugee Council* are the main three providers. Refugee employment service *Transitions* additionally recommends free online language-learning facilities through organisations such as the *BBC*, *British Council*, *English Club*, *English Page*, *English Space*, *Many Things*, and *Using English for Academic Purposes* (Transitions London 2016b). None of these are directly associated with UK NARIC.

Issues with the system

Funding and delays. Following the budget cuts to ESOL services by the government in 2012, it is estimated that 16,000 fewer individuals have access to these services annually (Migrants' Rights Network 2015). The government did not present any alternatives. Budget cuts thus reduced the capacity of services to provide ESOL classes, carry out strategic work with employers and remove barriers to refugees accessing employment. This is causing serious delays for asylum-seekers and refugees looking to access appropriate courses (Wonder Foundation 2015: 1).

For asylum seekers (those whose refugee status is under evaluation), funding for ESOL courses is provided only if no decision has been made on their claim for longer than six months (Skills Funding Agency 2014). This funding, however, is only 'co-funding', meaning the refugee has to cover 50 per cent of the costs (Wonder Foundation 2015: 1).

Language level. Often, those who cannot afford a sufficient amount of classes are placed on job preparation training. 'This focuses on CV writing, job search and interview techniques rather than raising the level of a person's English language skills. The result is that people can only apply for jobs that require limited or no English' (Refugee Council 2011: 4).

We suggest that developing a system based on the Swedish 'step-in jobs' programme will help to alleviate these issues.

Step-in jobs

The Swedish government subsidises two types of employment for refugees and non-European immigrants. 'Step-in jobs' require evening courses in Swedish, whereas 'new start jobs' do not. If non-EU migrants or refugees have been granted a residence permit during the past 36 months, they can apply for so-called step-in jobs. This means that the employer receives a government grant towards the employee's pay – as much as 80 per cent, but not more than SEK 800 per day. The employee must be taking a course in Swedish for Immigrants (SFI) at the same time. Applicants can have a step-in job for six months at a time, for a maximum of 24 months. There are approximately 2,500 individuals in step-in jobs at any one time, falling short of the Swedish government's ambition of 4,000 (Swedish National Audit Office 2013: 1).

An assessment conducted by the Swedish National Audit Office in 2013 concluded that ‘a chain consisting of a step-in job followed by a new start job leads to new arrivals eventually approaching the regular labour market’ (National Audit Office 2013: 2). Also, ‘step-in employees and new start employees have gained an improved labour market status following the incentives’ (National Audit Office 2013: 2). The National Audit Office’s statistical analysis reveals that step-in employees did not have a higher probability of finding unsubsidised employment within three years. However, this is largely due to the fact that many step-in employees go straight from a step-in job to a new start job, rather than apply for unsubsidised employment. ‘The assessment shows that a step-in job increases the likelihood of a new start job, and a new start job increases the probability of a regular job. We have also observed that, among those who had a new start job, it went significantly better for those who had had a step-in job before the new start job’ (National Audit Office 2013: 3).

One issue is that the system remains concentrated to a few industries and occupations. Equally, it has been suggested that the exertion of employment in parallel with language study causes the latter to suffer. Larger employers in private and public sectors are also not as greatly affected by the economic stimulus step-in jobs entail, so tend to offer fewer step-in jobs than smaller industries (National Audit Office 2013: 4).

The National Audit Office suggest that the ‘Arbetsförmedlingen’ therefore work on contacting more employers, but avoid implementing more generous rules as a means to creating more step-in jobs. The ‘Arbetsförmedlingen’ should also monitor the step-in employees’ SFI studies during and after completion of the step-in job (National Audit Office 2013: 4).

Proposals

The closest framework to step-in jobs in the UK is the support provided to refugees by the social enterprise *Transitions*. *Transitions* facilitates and arranges internships and jobs by putting refugee professionals in touch with employers, and vice versa. The service has successfully found employment or work experience in engineering, law, IT, architecture, political economy, marine biology, accountancy, international development, and finance, among others (Transitions London 2016a: 1-12). One drawback is that refugees are required to have a certain proficiency in English before they can use *Transitions*' services.

'Step-in jobs' adapted to the UK. We propose that a similar system to step-in jobs be developed in the UK and subsidised by the government with the aim of improving upon and universalizing the *Transitions* framework. There are many benefits to the step-in system over the current, relatively disjointed UK system. By working alongside language learning, newly acquired vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation learnt in class could be practiced at work, and vice versa, making for faster linguistic improvement. In healthcare, it is logical to divide preparation for the NARIC English Language Assessment, PLAB and IELTS between work experience and language classes in this way. Finally, by drawing on the Swedish National Audit Office's criticisms of the Swedish model, we propose that a detailed reporting and monitoring system be set up alongside the step-in job system so that future flaws with the system can be identified and resolved as effectively as possible.

Labour market integration

Problems with integration in the UK labour market

Having discussed the problems faced by refugees in having their qualifications recognised as well as those relating specifically to language, we now consider the final step of integration into the labour market. The UK has historically struggled to integrate refugee workers into its labour market in the same numbers as other demographic groups. Whilst recent data is sparse, estimates have shown economic participation on arrival as low as 29 per cent (Bloch 2004), only a weak improvement on an estimate from 1995 of 27 per cent (Carey-Wood et al 1995). A survey conducted in 2009 showed employment rates among refugees reaching a high of 49 per cent after 21 months of arrival (Cebulla et al 2009), which still remained well below the average employment rate of 80 per cent for the UK's working-age population. A quarter of those surveyed were employed in temporary positions, and over a third were working part-time, indicating that many of those finding employment were doing so in positions with few opportunities for progression.

In the context of the refugee crisis that is currently unfolding across Europe, the struggles of the German labour market in successfully absorbing the influx of primarily Syrian refugees paint a similar picture. Polls by the Munich-based Ifo institute of over 1,000 personnel managers found that even in the lowest skilled jobs, their chances of employing refugees were 41 per cent, which drops to 22 per cent for skilled jobs and just 3 per cent for management positions (Falck et al 2016: 83-85). More worryingly, only 7 per cent of German companies were employing refugees or had done so in the past two years, with many of these concentrated in the relatively low-skilled catering sector (28 per cent of recent hiring).

The picture that emerges not only shows that refugees face additional difficulty in entering the labour market when compared with equally skilled non-refugee workers, but that this difficulty markedly increases for higher-skilled jobs. The combination of these two factors has resulted in a persistently uneven situation with relatively low levels of economic participation amongst refugees, which appears to be skewed towards low-skilled and part-time work. The data supports this view, with over half of surveyed refugees in new employment feeling that they were over-qualified for their job. This section therefore examines the role played by businesses in the process of labour market integration of refugees. In particular, we consider the employer-related

difficulties faced by refugees in seeking a job, as well as best practices in tackling these issues and our proposals moving forward for the UK.

Informational failure

Several of the barriers to employment for refugees most widely cited by employers, such as inadequate language skills and incomplete or incompatible qualifications, have already been covered extensively. However, after controlling for these factors, the area which offers the greatest obstacle for refugee integration into the labour market is informational failure relating to the poor levels of refugee interaction with job-finding institutions.

Data relating to the use of existing public and private sector job-finding institutions indicates some clear trends among refugees. Mainstream employment services are typically more likely to be used by refugees that have been in the country longer with a stronger grasp of the local language, but the take-up and knowledge of these services still remains very low. A Refugee Council report showed that just 11 per cent of refugees surveyed had used their Jobcentre to find a job, and the same amount had accessed refugee agency career advisory services. Similarly, just 7 per cent had used private agencies and 5 per cent had used community groups (Shiferaw & Hagos 2002).

More worrying however was the lack of informational awareness regarding work-related schemes, with fewer than half of the refugees surveyed even aware of employment schemes run by their Jobcentre. In a DWP study, over 40 per cent of refugee respondents cited lack of information or unfamiliarity with the UK system as a barrier to labour market participation, with 10 per cent citing it as the main barrier to their participation (Bloch 2002b). As a result, informal personal contact is the most common means of job seeking and gaining advice on employment, a process suffering from incomplete information and contributing to the observed underemployment of skilled refugee workers.

Best practices for countering informational failure

Practices across Europe in the past for dealing with refugee integration into the labour market have focused on either the refinement of existing mainstream employment services or the establishment of auxiliary institutions. These methods have largely been designed with a

relatively low number of refugees in mind, and therefore their applicability to the current refugee crisis is somewhat limited.

Countries such as Italy, Sweden and Norway have targeted existing mainstream job service institutions, typically those administered by municipalities, to improve the labour market integration of refugees. Of these, perhaps the most successful has been that of Norway, which piloted its compulsory Introduction Program in 2005 for newly arrived refugees. The program, which runs for approximately 8,000-9000 refugees a year, provides assistance and informational guidance for vocational training and job-finding. The program was administered through local municipalities and existing mainstream services, and yielded strong results with 53 per cent of refugees going straight into the labour market or pursuing further education, rising further to 67 per cent after one year (Lodovici 2010).

Alternative measures have sought to create auxiliary institutions, typically NGOs, which work in alliance with government-backed mainstream services to bridge the informational gap between refugee job-seekers and employers. Whilst such institutions currently operate in France and Germany, the most successful example has been that of the Netherlands and the Emplooi Foundation set up by the Dutch Council of Refugees. The system operates by employing retired entrepreneurs and business people to act as ‘mentors’ that carry out an intensive interview with each refugee, visit employers with them, go to interviews, help with letters of application, and so on. The Public Employment Service meanwhile works in close alliance with these mentors seeing them as external partners who are able to help them to meet new targets for the employment of minorities and to support the integration of newcomers. The system has proven highly cost-effective, with over 2,000 refugees matched with an employer between 2005 and 2008 despite a small base of only 80-100 mentors (European Council 2010: 11).

However, in light of the more recent influx of refugees and particularly the difficulties of mainstream services to cope with the large volume of new applicants, we also highlight recent private-sector initiatives that have shown success through greater speed and flexibility. One such high-profile example is the Austria-based tech start-up Refugees Work, an online platform to link refugees with potential employers. The platform uses an algorithm to link refugees with potential jobs based on their background skills, language, place of residence, and the specific legal environment of an individual’s work status. Despite only launching in early 2016, the platform already has over 1,000 registered refugees and over 130 registered employers many of whom are

seeking specialised skills and looking to boost corporate diversity. The advantages of such an approach are obvious through its speed, ease-of-use and scalability to a much larger refugee population.

Proposals

The data presented above highlights the importance of eliminating barriers to the labour market for refugees beyond those of language and certification. In particular, we consider the effect of informational failure on the current system, and the adverse impact it has upon economic participation and appropriate matching of skills to employers. Resolving this issue in the context of such a vast influx of refugees requires an approach that appeals to public and private institutions individually as well as encouraging greater co-operation between the two. We therefore offer the following proposals:

Information collection and sharing between agencies. Information about the profile, language, skills and place of residence of each refugee should be collected and shared between local authorities, NGOs, community organisations and private agencies involved in the employment process.

Distribution of information to refugees. Information needs to reach refugees as early as possible following a positive decision on their case. It should be targeted based on language proficiency and reach refugees in an accessible and culturally appropriate form, in both oral and written information formats.

Comprehensive specialist services for refugees. Resources should be allocated to increase the breadth of specialist services available for refugees in relation to problems of poor information and lack of professional networks. This should either be through increased funding for existing mainstream agencies or the creation of auxiliary institutions working in tandem with existing frameworks.

Incentives for private sector initiatives. Private companies need to be given financial support and tax incentives in order to establish networks with refugees and encourage prospective employers to sign up for programs that provide additional support and training.

Conclusion

We conclude by repeating the key proposals offered throughout the paper, and the analogous equivalence agencies from which they are borrowed.

Recognising undocumented qualifications

1. Assessment-based recognition of qualifications. Proposing the development of an assessment-based equivalence procedure run by UK NARIC based on the Norwegian and Dutch models, as a contingency for refugees unable to prove their qualifications.
2. Official recognition of alternative equivalence procedures. Proposing the passage of affirmative legislation in the UK allowing for “other suitable procedures” to determine the professional skills of applicants, following the German model.

Accreditation and language learning

1. ‘Step-in jobs’ adapted to the UK. Proposing the close examination and imitation of the Swedish ‘step-in jobs’ and ‘new start jobs’ programmes. In healthcare, this should follow a pattern of preparation for separate language- and knowledge-based assessment. A further office should be established for continued review of the effectiveness of the programme.

Labour market integration

1. Information collection and sharing between agencies. Proposing that the language, skills and place of residence of refugees be collected centrally, following the achievements of the Austria-based tech start-up Refugees Work.
2. Distribution of information to refugees. Proposing the adoption of an equivalent to the Norwegian Introduction Program, and similar programmes in Italy and Sweden.
3. Comprehensive specialist services for refugees. Proposing the establishment of direct support networks, inspired by the Emplooi Foundation in the Netherlands.
4. Incentives for private sector initiatives. Proposing the introduction of tax incentives and financial support for private companies offering employment to refugees.

By recognising the skills of refugees in these ways, the UK will be better placed to fulfil its legal and moral obligations towards humanitarian migrants, and to gain from the wealth of knowledge and experience that they bring with them.

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