



A right to a voice: the cost of denying language to asylum seekers

Background

The National Institute of Adults Continuing Education (NIACE) consultation document, *Focusing English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) on Community Cohesion* supports recent research findings from the National Research and Development Centre (NRDC). The report states that newly arrived asylum seekers who engage in learning and ESOL tuition require less time to acquire essential English skills and positively contribute to community integration. However, asylum seekers are currently unable to access any publicly funded ESOL for the first six months in the country. (ESOL funding is only available for those with refugee status, whose claim for asylum has been recognised, and who are in receipt of income based benefits or are unemployed.) This impacts asylum seekers' ability to contribute to their local community and the labour workforce whilst their application is being considered. Lack of English skills means more reliance on support services and the welfare state.

This paper identifies the cost of not allowing newly arrived asylum seekers access to ESOL provision.

The decision to deny newly arrived asylum seekers ESOL tuition during the first six months of their stay in the UK, places a great pressure on individuals by excluding this vulnerable group from ESOL provision until they have been granted refugee status. Without the skills to speak English they are unable to develop relationships with new neighbours. The policy also makes it harder to re-engage this group with ESOL provision in the future, and places them in a position where they are even harder to reach. Further impact is placed on the welfare state, where the cost of supporting asylum seekers is far greater than it would be if they had been given the opportunity to enter ESOL classes from the first day of the asylum claim. The British Medical Association reinforces in a recent report, *Asylum seekers and their health* (BMA, 2008) the importance of ESOL skills for refugees and asylum seekers by drawing attention to insufficient translation services, in particular in the area of mental health. The effective use of language would alleviate these concerns as asylum seekers would be better able to communicate health difficulties.

Asylum seekers

Funded by the East Midlands Development agency, NIACE conducted the *Asylum Seekers' Skills and Qualifications Audit Pilot Project* (NIACE, 2001). The project provided evidence that those who seek haven in the UK are skilled and have attained professional qualifications in many fields, bringing highly sought after expertise to the UK. The methodology allowed the respondents to provide details of previous qualifications and skills, identifying that 101 of the 121 respondents (85%) had been educated, ranging from school certificates to higher and professional qualifications. The in-depth findings from the project identified that 80% of respondents were in paid employment before they came to the UK. Many of the asylum seekers involved in the audit project originated from a diverse range of backgrounds, including, Iraq, Zimbabwe, Iran, Afghanistan and Somalia. Moreover, the skills and qualifications audit project identifies that many asylum seekers possess skills in a number of specialised fields. 14

respondents had teaching qualifications, 5 had medical expertise and a further 5 had engineering accreditations. A further 10% were skilled in banking, accountancy, surveying and other business related professions. One third of the total respondents were involved in service industries. Current statistics from Asylum Seeker Support (2008) provide evidence that the top 5 countries that asylum seekers are coming from are Eritrea, Afghanistan, Iran, China and Somalia. A similar skills and qualifications audit project is recommended to identify current baseline data.

The findings provide grounds for greater investment in ESOL provision for asylum seekers. The results identify that some asylum seekers who enter the UK have professional skills and the potential to bridge the skills gap and make a contribution to the current Skills Pledge.

Those professionally qualified asylum seekers who seek refuge in the UK may be described as offering a “zero cost” benefit to the UK economy. They have received schooling and university education in their home country, at no cost to the UK, and arrive needing only ESOL provision, to enter the UK economy at a professional level, fully contributing their skills and expertise.

Skills shortages

A report by economists at the University of Strathclyde, *The Impact of Asylum Seekers on the Glasgow Economy* carried out by a local government body the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (2005) indicated that asylum seekers tend to be educated and under 34. Many asylum seekers are skilled in various fields, and only require ESOL to provide them with the opportunity to contribute to society in a number of beneficial ways. Research seems to indicate that the UK is missing out on the contribution asylum seekers could be making to the UK economy. Not only do asylum seekers want to work, but they are often highly skilled and could fill some of the current skills shortages (Refugee Council 2005). The Migration Advisory Committee’s paper *Skilled, shortage, sensible*, published in September 2008, provides evidence that identifies a comprehensive range of skilled occupations that currently experience shortages in the UK. The list examines the whole labour market and the range of identified skills encompasses a whole spectrum of occupations, from medical practitioners, engineers and science related occupations through to teachers, chefs and care workers. The paper states that the list provides evidence of skilled occupations where shortages would sensibly be filled by immigrants. The skills identified match many of the skills brought to the UK by asylum seekers, ESOL skills would therefore increase their opportunity to contribute to, and become an integral part of the initiative to fill the gaps that the paper recommends. The first ever skills audit carried out amongst refugees in Wales, established that 60% have attained a further or higher education qualification (Welsh Refugee Council, 2007). The result of free ESOL provision for newly arrived asylum seekers would be a positive impact on community cohesion, bring greater skills to the community, and ultimately lead to a more productive labour force.

The cost of not funding ESOL

Asylum seekers who lack language skills are more likely to suffer with the following;

- Isolation, affecting mental health and well-being
- Difficulty in expressing themselves in English, which can lead to frustration or physical aggression
- Difficulty in communicating with public bodies, leading to misunderstandings or needing to employ interpreters at consultations, meetings or interviews
- Difficulty in understanding medical advice, children used as interpreters, leading to possible ill-health and NHS costs
- Possibility of inaccurate information, reliance on children for other translation support (e.g. with school teachers)

As a result this may impact on the state in the following areas;

- Income support/Income based – Job Seekers Allowance
- Housing benefit & council tax benefit
- Incapacity benefit
- Translation costs for schools/hospitals/GP's
- NHS
- Crime and police investigation

The figures for the cost of income support, housing benefit, interpreters and other related benefits are listed below and are taken from the Child Poverty Action Group's Welfare Benefits and Tax Credits Handbook (2008). The hypothetical case studies demonstrate the cost of supporting a refugee family and a single refugee male.

Case study A

Single refugee man (over 25 years old)

Benefit	Rate per week/hour	Monthly cost	Yearly cost
Income support/income based JSA	£60.50 (per week)	£242	£2904
Housing & council tax	£60.50 (per week)	£242	£2904
Incapacity benefit (high rate)	£75.40 (per week)	£301.60	£3619.20
Interpreters cost	£35.00 (per hour)	£150 (4 hours)	£1800 (52 hours)
Total		£935.60	£11,227.20

Case study B

Refugee family (over 25 years old) with 1 child

Benefit	Rate per week/hour	Monthly cost	Yearly cost
Income support/income based JSA	£94.95 (per week)	£378.80	£4545.60
Income support family premium	£16.75 (per week)	£67	£804
Income support child under 20 yrs personal allowance	£52.59 (per week)	£210.36	£2524.32
Housing Council Tax	£94.95 (per week)	£378.80	£4545.60
Housing Council Tax family premium	£75.40 (per week)	£301.60	£3619.20
Incapacity benefit (high rate)	£75.40 (per week)	£301.60	£3619.20
Interpreters cost	£35.00 (per hour)	£280 (8 hours)	£3360 (96 hours)
Total		£1918.16	£23,017.92

Cost benefit

The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) has set the tariff for ESOL for Work at £880. This represents approximately 4% of the cost of supporting a refugee family on benefits over a period of 12 months as represented by Case Study B and 8% for the single man represented in Case Study A. These figures illustrate the potential cost benefit of ESOL provision for newly arrived asylum seekers. ESOL provision could potentially save £22,000 in benefit payments over a 12 month period, whilst also allowing asylum seekers to better integrate into the community, with the additional bonus of preparing them for work should their application be successful. An investigative study is recommended to provide tangible evidence to support these figures.

Impact and benefits

The government's change in ESOL policy lacks prudence. Initiatives to drive forward the skills amongst the workforce will miss the contribution that asylum seekers can make to today's economy. Many asylum seekers have been professionals within their fields and have had very successful careers. Lack of ESOL skills may lead people into poverty and make them harder to reach in the future.

The Human Rights Act places the UK in a position where it has pledged to allow refugees the right to live a normal life and freedom from undue threats. Many asylum seekers are particularly vulnerable; a right to a voice and a right to life without poverty, is just. ESOL policy must display flexibility, to ensure human rights protection is available to asylum seekers (Humanitarian Practice Network) Allowing asylum seekers to work would also go a long way to countering some of the negative perceptions of asylum seekers and help them to integrate better into their local community (Refugee Council, 2005).

The saving of funding ESOL provision for asylum seekers is a false economy, as the actual cost to government of the consequences of lack of language skills amongst asylum seekers is likely to far outweigh any savings. Similar life opportunities must be based on a vision of integrated and cohesive communities, this will enthuse a sense of belonging and positive relationships among community members.

References

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