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# MOVING ON? DISPERSAL POLICY, ONWARD MIGRATION AND INTEGRATION OF REFUGEES IN THE UK

Education  
Briefing

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# Moving on? Dispersal policy, onward migration and integration of refugees in the UK

## Education briefing

Since 2000, the UK has operated a policy of compulsory dispersal, designed to 'spread the burden' of housing asylum seekers across the UK and to discourage long-term settlement in London and the South East. This research enhances the understanding of refugee integration in the UK by focusing on the onward migration after dispersal of those who were granted refugee or humanitarian protection status.

### **This two-year (2012–14), ESRC-funded project:**

- mapped the geography of onward migration among refugees dispersed across the UK as asylum seekers;
- explored the main factors that influence refugees' decision to move or stay in a town or city and how this affects the process of integration; and
- considered the policy implications for the different levels of government, service providers and the voluntary sector of the impact of UK dispersal upon refugee onward migration and integration.

The results are based on quantitative and qualitative research data from four different sites across the UK: Glasgow, Cardiff, Manchester and London. The data included 83 in-depth interviews with refugees, analysis of Refugee Integration and Employment Service (RIES) client data (2008–11) and Home Office Survey of New Refugees (SNR) data (2005–09).

### **The key findings of the study are:**

- Dispersal policy has diversified the ethnic composition of UK cities, with evidence of growing numbers of refugees staying in the areas to which they were dispersed.
- Nevertheless, refugees who are dispersed as asylum seekers still have higher levels of onward migration than other new refugees.
- Multiple factors influence refugees' decisions to stay or move on from dispersal locations including co-ethnic and local communities, employment, education, life course, housing, place of dispersal, racism and health.
- Refugees may onward migrate or decide to stay after being dispersed, but neither of the two options can be regarded as always being the best for integration.

This briefing focuses on education as a factor influencing decisions to onward migrate or stay, as well as its impact on refugee integration.

## Policy context

UK dispersal policy began in 2000, a result of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. Asylum applicants can opt to be 'fully supported' (i.e. receive housing and subsistence) or 'subsistence only'. If individuals require housing while awaiting their asylum decision (fully supported), they are dispersed across the country on a no-choice basis. Alternatively, they can choose to live with friends or family in any location (subsistence only). Once an individual is granted refugee status, those fully supported must leave their dispersal accommodation within 28 days. Section 11 of the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants etc.) Act 2004 provided that asylum seekers establish a local connection to the dispersal site where they were provided accommodation. This means that refugees who require local authority housing must apply in the same area to which they are dispersed and is known as the 'local connection rule'. Local authorities can therefore refer individuals to the original dispersal area for housing claims, with the aim of reducing onward movement.<sup>1</sup>

As education is a devolved matter, a number of policy differences exist between England, Scotland and Wales with regard to asylum seekers' and refugees' eligibility for home tuition fees, fee remission and student support for further and higher education.

In England, adult asylum seekers are only eligible for home student status to attend state-funded further education courses if they have not received a decision on their claim or appeal after six months. Eligibility for full or partial fee remission is limited depending on the age and the level of the course.<sup>2</sup> Asylum seekers are only eligible for co-funded English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes. Refugees are eligible for home student status and are entitled to full fee remission if receiving benefits, under the same conditions as UK nationals. Those in receipt of certain benefits are eligible for free ESOL classes. Concerning higher education, refugees are classified as home students and are entitled to student support. Asylum seekers are normally considered as international students for fee purposes but universities have discretion to charge home fees or waive fees completely.<sup>3</sup>

In Wales, asylum seekers receiving support and refugees are treated as home students for the purposes of further education and are eligible for free ESOL classes. Refugees receiving benefits may be entitled to fee remission and financial support. Concerning higher education, asylum seekers are normally considered as overseas students, but this is at the discretion of the institution. Refugees are classified as home students and are eligible for student support.<sup>4</sup>

In Scotland, fees are waived for all asylum seekers studying any part-time advanced or non-advanced course, including ESOL. Asylum seekers are en-

<sup>1</sup> Different rules apply in Scotland where asylum seekers are not deemed to have established a local connection as a result of being provided with dispersal accommodation there.

<sup>2</sup> Skills Funding Agency, Funding Rules 2014 to 2015 (v2), Section 4: Annex 1; Refugee Council. 2014. *Short guide on access to further education in England for asylum seekers and refugees*.

<sup>3</sup> Refugee Council. 2013. *Short Guide for Advisers on Access to Higher Education*.

<sup>4</sup> South West Wales Reaching Wider Partnership. 2011. *A Guide to Further and Higher Education for Asylum Seekers and Refugees Living in Wales*.

titled to a fee waiver from the day of their arrival. With regard to higher education, eligible Scottish domiciled refugees studying full-time in Scotland are able to have tuition fees paid by the Student Awards Agency for Scotland if studying for a first degree or equivalent, and have access to financial support. This does not normally extend to asylum seekers who are considered as overseas students and are not eligible for support, but universities can exercise discretion and provide funding.<sup>5</sup>

While education is an important aspect of integration,<sup>6</sup> asylum seekers and refugees face a number of barriers including lack of funding, accessible information and advice and childcare, as well as difficulties in providing proof of previous qualifications.<sup>7</sup> The lack of the targeted refugee integration support that had been provided nationally under RIES until 2011, which included assistance with education, exacerbates the problem.

Previous integration strategies at the national,<sup>8</sup> regional and local<sup>9</sup> levels have acknowledged the importance of education, the obstacles faced by refugees in accessing it and the need for support. Despite these efforts, however, gaps in asylum-seekers' and refugees' participation in education remain, with potentially adverse impacts on their integration.

## Dispersal, education and refugee integration: findings and policy implications

Education, including ESOL, is key to the successful long-term integration of refugees in UK society. In the research, education was explored in relation to the mobility plans of refugees post-status and how this connects to integration.

### Key findings

#### Onward migration decisions are informed by:

- the educational career of refugees;
- perceptions of education quality and provision across the UK; and
- access to adult and children's education (including ESOL).

#### Education is closely linked to refugee integration:

- Education enables refugees to gain knowledge/skills, find employment and forge social networks.

<sup>5</sup> University of Strathclyde. 2014. *Strathclyde to offer University scholarships to asylum seekers*.

<sup>6</sup> Ager A. and Strang A. 2008. Understanding integration: a conceptual framework. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21(2): 166–91.

<sup>7</sup> Doyle, L. and O'Toole, G. 2013. *A Lot to Learn: Refugees and Asylum Seekers post-16 Learning*. London: Refugee Council.

<sup>8</sup> Home Office. 2000. *Full and Equal Citizens: A Strategy for the Integration of Refugees into the United Kingdom*; Home Office. 2005. *Integration Matters: A National Strategy for Refugee Integration*; Home Office. 2009. *Moving On Together: Government's Recommitment to Supporting Refugees*.

<sup>9</sup> Scottish Government. 2013. *New Scots: Integrating Refugees In Scotland's Communities*; Welsh Assembly Government. 2008. *Refugee Inclusion Strategy*; Yorkshire and Humber Regional Migration Partnership. 2009. *Finding Sanctuary, Enriching Yorkshire and Humber – the Regional Integration Strategy for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (2009-2011)*; Greater London Authority. 2009. *London Enriched: The Mayor's Strategy for Refugee Integration in London*.

## Discussion

- The educational career of refugees can impact on decisions to stay or onward migrate.
- Perceptions of education quality and provision are shared amongst refugee communities and inform onward migration decisions.
- Access to adult and children's education, including English language classes, influences decisions to stay or move on from dispersal sites.

Access to courses and funding can be the priority for refugees and the key factor influencing onward migration decisions. As one refugee explained:

*'We lived [in] Glasgow one year, me and my wife and my children in Glasgow, and we moved to Edinburgh because I got full-time study course at Edinburgh College. That's why we have moved to Edinburgh.'* (Abubassil, M, Syria, Glasgow).

It was found that refugees shared information about education provision, which informed onward migration decisions. Providing reliable and accessible information about the availability of educational opportunities and their entitlements would enable refugees to make fully informed decisions about onward migration. Local authorities could encourage refugees to remain in the dispersal site by providing information and advice about the learning opportunities available locally.

- **Children's education can take priority among families when making migration decisions, resulting in refugees remaining in or moving to locations with little or no existing ethnic community.**

Discussing her mobility plans, one refugee woman explained how she prioritised her children's education above being located near to an ethnic community:

*'I can live without [the Somali] community, but my children is very important, that's why I'm here. My children like this school. My daughter, they say me you never leave here. Mama, I love here, I want it.'* (Amira, F, Somalia, Manchester).

The importance of children's education sits alongside other challenges that refugees, and women in particular, face in accessing education. One obstacle for refugee women is childcare, which can be immensely difficult in the absence of social networks or community support in dispersal sites. This highlights the need to provide appropriate childcare to ensure that refugee women are not excluded from accessing educational opportunities.

- **Education enables refugees to gain knowledge and skills as well as forging social networks and connections, which are important to find employment and for integration in society.**
- **Positive experiences of accessing education seem to encourage refugees to remain in dispersal sites, if suitable courses are available.**

The findings show that providing access to suitable courses as early as possible, including during the asylum procedure, facilitates refugee integration. Such provision could also be beneficial for encouraging asylum seekers to remain in the area where they were dispersed. One refugee explained how the opportunity to access education during the asylum process has had a positive impact on integration and shaped his decision to stay:

*'When I start college I change my mind [about moving away from Glasgow]. I start to integrate with people when I start college, then I see Glasgow is a very friendly place and I like it, and I'm here now.'* [Goitom, M, Eritrea, Glasgow].

Access to ESOL was highlighted by refugees as particularly important to long-term integration:

*'If I go to shop or go to a restaurant, I can't get food without English. I have a lot of experiences here where I can't communicate and tell people what I want. These experiences make me feel not like a person. It doesn't feel good when people talk to you or ask a question and you can't answer. I feel like a child who can't understand and speak. It's not a good feeling. This is why I changed priority from a job first, education second to education first, job second.'* [Adam, M, Sudan, Manchester].

Allowing asylum seekers to access free ESOL courses immediately, as is the case in Scotland and Wales, could increase self-esteem, foster integration and improve job prospects. Advanced English courses would enable refugees to reach their full potential and access education commensurate with their aspirations.

## Recommendations

### **The UK Government should:**

- ensure all asylum seekers are eligible to access free ESOL courses immediately after claiming asylum;
- consider waiving the fees for all asylum seekers attending further education courses; and
- ensure funding agencies provide clear and accessible guidance on asylum seekers' and refugees' eligibility and entitlements in relation to further and higher education.

### **Local authorities should:**

- in partnership with funding agencies and learning providers, develop information packages for asylum seekers and refugees specific to the local context, outlining their eligibility, entitlements and additional sources of funding for further and higher education.

### **The Scottish and Welsh Governments should:**

- ensure funding agencies provide clear and accessible guidance on asylum seekers' and refugees' eligibility and entitlements in relation to further and higher education.

**Learning providers should:**

- ensure staff dealing with asylum seekers and refugees have an understanding of their rights and specific needs and are capable of addressing them (training could be delivered in partnership with refugee-assisting NGOs);
- provide information, guidance and advice to asylum seekers and refugees on eligibility, entitlements and sources of funding;
- exercise discretion in relation to asylum seekers' eligibility for home fee status for higher education and consider providing alternative financial support, e.g. through scholarships; and
- endeavour to meet refugees' childcare needs, including by providing childcare facilities, establishing scholarships to cover the costs of childcare or making arrangements with childcare providers.

The results presented are drawn from the project report: Stewart, E. and Shaffer, M. [2015] *Moving on? Dispersal Policy, Onward Migration and Integration of Refugees in the UK*, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow.

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