

“What Future”? “A Profile of Refugees in the Labour Market”

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Introduction

The title of my paper this morning is “What Future”? A Profile of Refugees in the Labour Market”. Initially, when I began thinking about what I was going to present I tried to be optimistic about the future of work for refugees in Australia, but after reviewing my program statistics, rereading the current literature about refugees in the labour market and speaking to my colleagues I became convinced that there was nothing to be positive about. No headway has been made since Robyn Iredale, Bob D’Arcey and Eileen Pittway published data on refugee employment in 1992, and cuts in government funding to programs heavily utilised by refugees are currently making the situation much worse.

As a direct service provider to refugees in the area of employment at STARTTS which is an organisation primarily focused on the provision of counselling and rehabilitation to survivors of torture and trauma, I have decided to profile refugee jobseekers as specific group of migrants who must hurdle multiple barriers in order to be competitive in the labour force. I will begin by discussing the labour market statistics pertaining to refugees and then illustrate the arduous process that refugees must tackle before gaining their first job. Leading on from this, observation will be made about current trends affecting the employment prospects of refugees. I will conclude by mentioning the potential disadvantage faced by refugees and other marginalised groups as a result of recent changes to industrial relations legislation.

Refugees mainly reside in Western and South Western Sydney

See appendix A estimated number of refugees in NSW*

As this is a forum about employment in Western Sydney, the issue of refugee unemployment is pertinent because 68% of the refugee population of New South Wales are presently residing in the Western and South Western suburbs of Sydney, mostly in or around the suburbs of Auburn, Parramatta, Blacktown, Fairfield, Cabramatta and Liverpool. The estimated number of refugees in Western Sydney is 52,479 people based on 1991 census data, so the real figures in 1997 are likely to be much higher. Unfortunately, Western and South Western Sydney have the highest unemployment levels in the metropolitan area and often people are housed in parts of suburbs which are badly serviced by public transport making access to many jobs difficult. Refugees have the highest unemployment rates in the labour market

It has been established in a number of studies that refugees have the worst unemployment rate in the Australian Labour Market. One of the difficulties in accessing statistics is the fact that refugees are always hidden amongst the data gathered about migrant unemployment in general and this often includes English speaking migrants who have similar employment patterns to Australian born. A recent article in the Sydney Morning Herald stated that 33% of the total unemployed labour force had been unemployed for over 12 months and that these

people run the risk of never re-entering the workforce or at best being resigned to the casual labour force. Most refugees fall into this long term unemployed category.

Refugees experience difficulty in accessing any kind of employment at all and some of refugees like those from Vietnam or the Middle East have unemployment rates which are up to four times higher than the national average. A recent investigation into assessment of overseas qualifications by Flatau and Wood for the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs found that unemployment is significantly higher for primary applicants with poor English language skills and for those admitted under the Special Humanitarian Program than for any other group of migrants, and that people born in South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, South America and Oceania were more likely to have higher unemployment rates and less likely to achieve equivalence in qualifications recognition than people born in the main English speaking countries and Northern Europe.

*See appendix B Unemployment Rates by country of origin. DEETYA May 1995 and Aug 1997

Barriers to Refugees Entering the Labour Market

Refugees face an extraordinary number of barriers whilst trying to access employment. Firstly, they must confront problems particular to all new arrivals in a foreign country, such as language difficulties, lack of Australian work experience, difficulty in gaining assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications, cultural differences in methods of finding employment, and very often indirect and systemic racism and ethnic stereotyping in the recruitment practices of both private and public sector employers.

In addition to these barriers there are the difficulties specific to being a refugee, the foremost being little choice over their country of resettlement. Whereas migrants in general have chosen to make their home Australia, refugees have been given little choice and are therefore unprepared and ambivalent about being exiled from ones homeland, it means losing a home, possessions, loved ones and support networks. Some have suffered torture and imprisonment. Long periods spent in refugee camps foster a significant loss of independence, reducing the right of individuals to make decisions about their own lives. The implications of this are obvious when these people try to enter a tight and highly competitive labour market.

Refugees rarely flee their country of origin with documentation proving their identity, as this would be highly dangerous. Whilst it may facilitate a smoother escape, it makes resettlement more difficult and accessing employment in line with previous educational and occupational levels virtually impossible.

The relationship between employment and mental health

Needless to say, finding employment is a priority for the successful resettlement for people from refugee backgrounds, because, more than any other factor in the lengthy and difficult process of resettling in a foreign country, it gives a person a sense of self worth and acceptance, both of which have been stripped from refugees. Unemployment not only causes financial problems, it has serious repercussions on a persons mental and physical health. Counsellors at STARTTS, which is primarily a mental health service, maintain that clients who manage to get jobs begin to respond better to therapy and that employment on the whole has a positive psychological impact on refugees and torture and trauma survivors. A former client who had experienced a long period of unemployment said;

“When I arrived in Australia I felt useless because I was not doing anything, I had worked all my life; I felt I was begging because I was taking money for free, and in the end I didn't believe in my ability to return to work. Like all refugees I had a dream and a hope when I left the camp; I had ideas about rebuilding my life, but when I reached Australia I was faced with reality and confusion. The longer I spent on social security the lower my self esteem became.”

The Process of Gaining Access to the Labour Market

For refugees, finding suitable employment is not simply a matter of looking in the newspaper and answering advertisements, but it involves a lengthy process which begins with on-arrival English classes. These usually result in refugee students acquiring survival but not vocational English proficiency. This is because refugees and torture and trauma survivors initially have trouble concentrating in class and experience greater difficulty retaining new information due to their past experiences. It is usually necessary for them to enroll in a number of other English classes such as ESOL, English for Work or English for Further Study in order to be able to compete with other job seekers. Many employers still discriminate on the basis of accent alone and not on English proficiency so it is hard for many non – English speakers to decide whether or not to continue studying English. If there are no integrated learning pathways or if funding for English provision continues to decrease as it has over the past two years then refugees will never acquire enough English to become marketable.

Once English proficiency has been largely established, refugee job seekers realise that they have difficulty in gaining recognition for their overseas qualifications either because they haven't brought any documents to Australia or because the qualifications they have obtained are not considered equivalent. The refugee jobseeker must then undertake further training either to upgrade their existing skills or to learn new ones which are in line with the fluctuating requirements of the Australian Labour Market. They must learn to write resumes and letters of application in an unfamiliar language and sit any professional or trade examinations.

The skilled up applicant eagerly approaches employers to be faced with the next barrier, “lack of local work experience” which necessitates undertaking an often lengthy period of unpaid work experience, voluntary work or on the job training so that the job seeker may prove his or her capabilities and acquire an Australian work reference. Only then is the applicant considered to be “work ready” even though they may have worked in the very same job for several years overseas.

Refugees often perform much better at work than at an interview. The normal anxiety experienced by most people in an interview situation is usually intensified for refugees and magnified many times for survivors of torture and trauma. The employment interview, especially with a panel, may be reminiscent of an interrogation or torture session. Employers are unlikely to be aware of “triggers” which may cause refugee applicants to react in unexpected ways to questioning and may therefore misjudge the suitability of the applicant.

After this process has been followed to a greater or lesser extent, an applicant may be lucky enough to find employment, but usually at a level which is significantly lower than positions previously held overseas. For example engineers might gain employment as technicians, registered nurses as nurses aids and teachers as child care assistants. Refugees experience much greater downward occupational mobility than non-refugees.

Trends and issues in refugee employment

I would like to move on to discuss a number of current trends occurring in the labour market which have serious repercussions on refugee employment.

1) The effect of the casualisation of labour and the expansion of the service industry

When refugees do manage to find employment it is most frequently in poorly paid, casual positions in the service industry. There is an extremely high degree of underemployment and occupational mismatch for the majority of refugees holding post secondary educational qualifications, especially those with qualifications gained in non – English speaking countries. I conducted a very basic analysis of my year to date program statistics to highlight this point. A total of 191 clients were seen between January and the end of August 1997. According to the way in which Specialist Migrant Placement Officers are required by DTEC to maintain statistics, 86 jobs were recorded, 56 of these were casual positions. This does not mean that 86 people actually found jobs because one person may have had a series of casual positions all of which are recorded, increasing the overall figure when the actual number of people who obtained jobs is much lower. In any case 56 of the 86 positions were found in the service industry. These people were employed as cleaners, sales assistants, low level clerical workers, kitchen hands, nurses aids and child care workers. The 26 positions obtained in the trades area included process workers, trades assistants and technicians. It is notable that although the majority of my clients have post secondary qualifications and many are overseas qualified professionals or licensed trades people not one of them has been employed in their own profession at an appropriate level in 1997.

See Appendages C. D & E SMPO Occupational Categories

A recent article in the Sydney Morning Herald by Ross Gittens stated that although total employment was up by 95,000 jobs between January and September 1997 only 20% of the jobs were full time. This means that over 80% of the positions were casual or part-time. The trend towards the casualisation of labour ensures that people who have multiple barriers to entering the labour force always remain on the margins, the surplus labour force, easily shed. The very people who need security and the opportunity to rebuild their lives are being left in a state of limbo, unable to apply for bank loans or to achieve a level of financial independence.

2) The demise of the manufacturing industry which was previously a traditional area of employment for migrants and refugees

Traditionally, newly arrived migrants and refugees were employed in the manufacturing industry, but these positions are increasingly hard to find. As the industry downsizes the trend appears to be to casualise the labour force and to upgrade the skill level required of applicants, namely in the area of English proficiency. As most refugees enter the country with little or no English their likelihood of being employed is diminished.

The range of opportunities for refugees in the labour market has decreased as more workers are made redundant and competition from unemployed Australian born workers increases. According to the most recent Australian Jobs Review by DEETYA the unemployment rate of recently arrived migrants was much higher than for those who have lived here for many years. Refugee new arrivals, although they are usually overqualified tend to seek employment as unskilled workers for various reasons, the foremost of those being lack of English language proficiency and non recognition of overseas skills. There is also a perception that this kind of work will be easier to acquire and that it will be less stressful in terms of energy and concentration. Ironically, these jobs are usually very physically and emotionally demanding.

3) Wastage of the skills and qualifications of migrants

Australia is negligent in its wastage of the skills and experience brought by migrants and refugees, skills which cost Australia nothing in terms of education and training. Rather than give statistics I would like to illustrate the point by using the example of a gentleman, I will call him Ahmed, who until recently was being assisted by a local Skillshare. Ahmed is an Iraqi refugee who arrived in Australia two years ago from Jordan where he was well employed as a university lecturer. He is fully qualified engineer with both a Masters Degree and a PhD from a British university. He is highly articulate in English and he has had numerous highly paid and prestigious positions including over ten years of employment as a Professor in Iraq. After two years of unemployment in Australia, and a string of rejections he has taken the heartbreaking decision to leave his family in Australia, and accept job as a university lecturer in one of the Gulf States. After making this decision he wrote to the Department of immigration explaining that it was never his intention to be dependant on a government and that he had been given incorrect information by the Australian embassy in Jordan about his potential employment prospects. Ahmed and many others like him are resources lost to Australia.

4) Funding cuts to Labour Market Programs and On the Job Training Opportunities

Recent government funding cuts have resulted in the abolition of some 250,000 places in training programs for the unemployed. Labour Market Programs, in my experience, have been responsible for bridging the gap between unemployment and employment for migrants and refugees. A good labour market program should ensure that potential employees are given the necessary and appropriate training to fulfil all the selection criteria for any particular job; and as far as possible people should be given access to LMP's which are compatible with their level of skills and training. Labour Markets Programs provide pathways, and without them many people find that there is no articulation from the point of entry into the labour market to the time when they actually obtain a job. As these vital links are being eroded the gaps in service provision to migrants and refugees widen.

Funding appears to have almost dried up for some of the excellent LMP's which incorporated English language tuition with vocational skills and often facilitated the entry of NESB migrants into particular occupations such as Nursing and Teaching. Rather than these genuine programs, unemployed people are being intimidated by politically motivated schemes such as "Work for the Dole", which according to the Prime Minister is supposed to teach "life skills" and not "job skills". Refugees in particular, as survivors of exile, forced detention, and life on the run do not need to be taught any more "life skills" but they need to be given the means by which they can find suitable and secure employment so that they can rebuild their lives.

5) Contracting Out of Employment Placements

There is strong concern amongst ethnic communities and workers of agencies who represent disadvantaged people that the current trend towards the contracting out of employment placement services may negatively impact upon the quality of services delivered, especially in terms of access and equity. The evidence, based on previous work contracted out by some government departments suggests that the standards of competency expected of a contractor are open to interpretation and that deterioration in service quality may occur when the economies of scale are lost. There are further concerns about the accountability of agencies in relation to their staff hiring practices and their understanding of the needs of NESB migrants, refugees and torture and trauma survivors.

One of the major inconsistencies anticipated is the provision of free interpreters to clients. As the use of interpreters was not required to be factored into tenders, agencies who are involved

in competitive tendering with an emphasis on cost reduction are quite likely to underbudget in this area. Many agencies will by necessity be focusing on profit margins and not on ensuring fair and equitable services to costly disadvantaged clients.

An interpretation of The Workplace Relations Act 1996 (Commonwealth)

Similarly, the 1996 Federal Workplace Relations Act would appear to bring little joy to people from disadvantaged groups, such as refugees who are marginalised in the workforce. The Act, which introduced a decentralised system of individual bargaining, awards with no minimum conditions, individual employment contracts and enterprise agreements at workplace level with or without union involvement cannot benefit the unemployed, those in unskilled occupations or workers with no collective voice and little bargaining power. Most refugee jobseekers, in my experience, would agree to work for under award conditions if it meant getting a job, they would be prepared to work with minimal occupational health and safety standards and lower pay. They would and do run the risk of occupational injury and they repeatedly suffer at the hands of unscrupulous employers who take advantage of the desperation of their situations.

To highlight this observation I will give an example of a client who came to see me very recently. This gentleman is a refugee who needed to save money to sponsor his wife and children, whom he had not seen for over three years. He had been working in Sydney bakery for two years, seven days a week, 10-12 hours per day, on night shift, for \$380 per week. Every fortnight he was allowed one day off, but to make up for that one day he had to work an extra four hours on the day before and the day after. He was not entitled to any sick pay or annual leave, being Casual. After two years of loyal employment my client became sick and took two days off work. When he returned to work he was told that his job was no longer available and that if he was sick that was "his problem". This kind of exploitation is frequently encountered by refugees and the current legislation appears to give these types of employers the green light to exploit the surplus labour force and the most marginalised and disadvantaged workers. As yet, the Employer Advocate which has been set up to handle breaches of Australian Workplace Agreements is untried and its real power to change employer practice is questionable.

Conclusion

In conclusion I would like state that refugees usually express keenness to work and a willingness to accept employment at any level in order to reconstruct their lives. They are survivors so they are used to taking risks, to deal with challenges and to working hard. They have been accepted into Australia because the people of this country undertook their international obligation to house some of the worlds 26 million stateless people. But this commitment is not always borne out by government policy, and in practise the very people who are taking refuge are constantly buffeted by continual change in labour market forces. As marginalised members of society they are caught in a cycle of long term unemployment broken only by stints of casual labour in the service industry or by the seasonal requirements of the manufacturing industry. If we maintain that employment is necessary for the successful resettlement of refugees then for the refugees of Western Sydney we may well ask "What future"?