

Marketing refugee skills: an Oxford success story

by Rachel Wiggans

Since 2001 Access First, a project of the Oxford-based charity Refugee Resource, has been working in partnership with other organisations to support refugees and asylum seekers into work and training that match their abilities and aspirations.

"I know people say asylum seekers come here to get money. Some people say asylum seekers don't want to work. I really want to work but it's not easy."

It is fundamental to Refugee Resource that refugees and asylum seekers themselves shape our work. Access First grew out of a series of consultation workshops with refugees and asylum seekers and an advisory group made up of refugees has met quarterly throughout the project. The first task of the project was for a trained group of refugees and asylum seekers to interview 95 people in nine languages about their skills and aspirations. Working in partnership with other local organisations working with refugees has also been essential to the success of the project and a project steering group has brought together representatives from five local statutory and voluntary organisations

In December 2003 the first phase of the project was completed, with 64% of participants having entered paid work.

Each individual had an initial interview to discuss appropriate support which could include any combination of:

- a work preparation course
- one-to-one advice and guidance
- an unpaid work placement tailored to their individual objectives
- using our resource area to access information about training and employment offered by other

agencies, local jobs and courses and study grants.

Some clients visit us two or three times for support then pursue work independently. With others we work more intensively, for between two months and two years.

"Sometimes you get hated because you don't speak the language. They look at you as though you are a very strange person. You just feel that you are isolated."

In partnership with Oxfordshire County Council's Community English School we developed a 60-hour work preparation course rooted in providing English language and basic computing training in an employment context. The course aims to prepare people for all aspects of work in Britain – preparation of personal statements and CVs, completing application forms and making presentations. Local employers have offered mock practice interviews and the tax office has visited to explain tax and UK social welfare insurance. Participants have been given an opportunity to learn about UK health and safety legislation and to obtain certification. Many have acquired a nationally-recognised computing certificate.

This course was very successful and Oxfordshire County Council has now taken responsibility for it. It continues to be available to refugees and asylum seekers as well as to others improving their knowledge of English.

"I learned many things from this course: helping me to be more confident about filling in application forms, writing a personal statement, speaking in job interviews, listening to get information about work, looking at job advertisements, speaking confidently to people to get information about any things that I want."

Unpaid work placements aim to:

- give an understanding of how their chosen area of work operates in Britain
- introduce trainees to people in the same area of work
- increase confidence about pursuing that area of work
- provide genuine work experience to help with future applications
- provide work references

Placements have been set up in retail, computer programming, office administration, mental health support and journalism. Placements have proven extremely successful; almost all those who have done one are now employed.

"The refugees we have taken on have made excellent members of staff, with a willingness to learn and a willingness to achieve. Their reliability and ability to do the job has been first rate. ... between them they have had only one day off sick."
Recruitment and Training Manager, Stagecoach (Oxford-based transport company)

Finding the right placement for an individual and setting it up for the benefit of both employer and trainee is time consuming, and Refugee Resource relies on good relationships with employers. The benefit is mutual and employers have praised us for the reliable committed people we



send them. Oxfordshire County Council, one of the largest employers in the county, has committed itself to collaborate with Refugee Resource in offering placements to refugees and asylum seekers — its Fire and Rescue Service has provided three placements and three jobs.

We are also involved in:

- countering racism and stereotypes: hostile comments from politicians and the media have a big impact on our clients.
- administering a small bursary fund to help overcome barriers to employment due to inability to pay for fees, books, travel costs, childcare and equipment
- running training events for employers and service providers

on refugee employment issues

- assisting refugee health professionals - with voluntary help from Oxford medical students - to pass the English language and professional exams required to begin the process of them obtaining registration in the UK.

We are pleased that 36% of those we have worked with for an extended period have now entered full-time employment and a further 28% are working part time. When we began we were told by an analogous project in London not to expect a success rate higher than 30%.

The decision of the UK government to prevent asylum seekers from working has meant that a greater proportion of our clients are refugees whose right

to stay has been (at least temporarily) recognised and we see fewer asylum seekers. We hope that future funding will enable us to support this vulnerable group, at least with finding voluntary work. In April 2004 we started a new project for unemployed refugees and those asylum seekers who have permission to work.

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Reporting asylum and refugee issues: a guide to good practice

The PressWise Trust, the UK's National Union of Journalists and UNHCR have produced a guide to enable journalists to report immigration and asylum issues accurately and fairly.

Acknowledging that journalists use shortcuts to convey information, the authors suggest precise, consistent and non-emotive definitions of key terms. It is particularly important not to equate 'asylum seekers' with 'illegal immigrants'. It is inaccurate to characterise all those smuggled into the UK (hidden in lorries, etc) as 'asylum seekers' as some may have no intention of claiming asylum. Whilst the UK government dubs such people as 'clandestines', the term 'irregular migrant' is more accurate and less confusing. The media should stress that people-smugglers are committing a crime but their clientele may not be.

Before they seek interviews with asylum seekers and refugees, journalists should be clear about their purpose, be sensitive to requests for anonymity and inform themselves about countries of origin.

The leaflet is online at: www.presswise.org.uk/display_page.php?id=657 Hard copies can be ordered by emailing anna@presswise.org.uk. Among the useful web resources cited in the report is the BBC's 'asylum seeker jargon buster', online at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3380397.stm>