

BSCKE Project Self Evaluation Report for CUPP Steering Group, June 2006 Education and Employment Routes for Refugees

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1. Project Description

The project aimed to build on previous research into the social exclusion of refugees and to explore the perceptions and experiences of refugees themselves as they seek to access education and employment opportunities in the UK. There are a number of diverse Black and minority ethnic and refugee communities in the city ranging from the fairly well established groups, such as the Sudanese, to the more recently arrived groups from Central Africa, the Middle East and Eastern Europe. There are differences between these communities in terms of their ethnicity, faith, size of community, and the networks and resources available to them. Within communities there are also divisions along gender, age, faith, class/caste lines and differences in legal status. In recognition of the heterogeneous nature of the refugee communities and the multiplicity of factors which can affect the refugee experience, the project was not based in one host community but instead sought to draw on the first hand experience of refugees from a range of communities. In order to try and reach as wide a cross section as possible we aimed to recruit researchers from at least four refugee communities. A training programme was tailored to meet the needs of researchers on this project. It was envisaged that with ongoing support the researchers would conduct life history interviews and would oversee the work of the project. Through providing the opportunity to work in partnership with academic staff at the university we hoped to provide experience and support to individual refugees wishing to enter Higher Education in the UK. At the same time it was envisaged that bringing refugees into the university community would continue the process of raising their profile and giving voice to their needs and aspirations within Higher Education.

2. Tasks and Milestones

The first phase of the project involved working with a colleague with expertise in life history work to develop and deliver a participatory research methods course, *Researching Ourselves*. One of the biggest difficulties we had at this stage of the project was getting the right researchers and defining 'refugee'. Although the publicity for the course clearly stated that the course was for refugees and asylum seekers we had several people turn up at the first session who didn't fall into either of these categories, but who felt themselves to be 'refugees' in the UK. This made us confront the rather thorny issue of who to include in the definition of 'refugee' and to explore what was particular about the refugee experience. For example, how does the experience of refugees differ from economic migrants

who have come here voluntarily in search of a better life, people here for 3 years with a spouse who is studying at the university, those who were refugees and are now British citizens, people whose asylum applications have been turned down by the Home Office or who are still waiting for a decision on their application, and people who are here permanently because they have married a British person? These different categories of people might share many of the same experiences – difficulty with language, social isolation, difficulty finding employment which reflects their qualifications and experience, restricted access to educational opportunities etc., but they might not have the legal status of refugee. In the end we decided to adopt an understanding of refugee to include people who came from outside of the European Union and who were in the UK permanently. So this excluded those here to study who could eventually return to their own country, and those from European cultures who we felt had advantages in terms of establishing social networks, cultural understanding and knowledge of how systems here work.

The other problem we encountered is that the refugee experience is often marked by continued migration and movement within the UK. Sometimes this is voluntary and sometimes it is enforced by the dispersal system. Two of the refugees on the course subsequently moved or were dispersed to other areas and one person had their application for asylum turned down and subsequently disappeared. This meant that out of the group of nine we were only able to recruit two researchers. As the project was only eighteen months long it wasn't feasible to run a second course and perhaps again face the problem of losing people before they had the opportunity to get started on the research so we had to rethink our approach. We decided to advertise and interview for researchers, and then after an initial induction to provide ongoing training and support as they were conducting the research. Using this approach and again using our networks we recruited a further three researchers making a total of five key researchers, two women and three men, from five different refugee communities in the city: Eritrean, Ethiopian, Ukrainian, Iranian and Palestinian.

A total of 23 interviews were conducted. The first phase of the project focused on issues around employment and education (16 interviews). Although we had planned that the researchers themselves would transcribe the tapes; this proved too time consuming for second language speakers and we had to pay someone else to take this on. Much of the data generated highlighted the difficulties facing refugees around gaining access to appropriate education and employment in the UK and this echoed research findings from previous research.¹ What was

¹ E.g. Aldridge F & Waddington S (2001) *Asylum Seekers' Skills and Qualification Audit Pilot Project*. Leicester: NIACE. Bloch A (2002) *Refugees' opportunities and barriers in employment and training*, Department for Work and Pensions Research Report 179, Leeds, CDS

interesting however, is the amount of information in the interviews around the effects of negative perceptions, prejudice and discrimination. Refugees appeared to be far more open and explicit around their negative experiences in the UK when talking to fellow refugees than, for example in previous research conducted by university researchers.² They were also more likely to share their stories of working illegally.

Towards the end of the project the research partners suggested we change the focus of the research to look at the social life of refugees and asylum seekers. The aim was to try and understand refugees as a whole without focusing on just a part of the refugee community or refugee experience. Social life, and how friendship groups change over time was felt to be not only a pertinent area for research, but also a more inclusive area. Some of the questions asked included:

- Who are your friends and other important people in your life?
- How have you made friends in the UK?
- What influences your choice of friends? Does immigration status influence friendships?
- How do you think you are perceived here: by British born people? By members of your own community?
- How did you travel to the UK? Has this influenced your experience here?

These were very different questions to those which university researchers had asked in the past and gave rise to some interesting interviews. Unfortunately, there was only time to conduct 7 interviews as the project came to an end. This would be an interesting area of research to pursue.

BSCKE support has been provided through out by the Development Manager, Dana Cohen. The project steering group, which it was envisaged would take a lead role in deciding the priorities and direction of the project, never really got established for reasons outlined in the next section. This meant that I often felt as if I was on my own running the project. My role at University of Sussex also changed during the project which meant it was not always easy to make the time to think through how the project might develop and how some of the partnership issues might be tackled. Regular meetings with Dana forced me to take stock of what the project was achieving and provided a sounding board for exploring future directions. Her support was invaluable in keeping me focused. Meeting with people from other BSCKE projects, particularly those working with 'marginalised' groups was reassuring; it's always comforting to know that others are struggling with similar issues.

² E.g. Morrice (2005) 'Ways into work', Adults Learning, 16.8, pp. 12-14

3. Partnership Working

Having identified and established the research team the reality of working together over the remaining fourteen months was a process of constant evolution and experimentation. Power and issues of inequality were embedded in the project from the start. It was the university that had written and submitted the project proposal with the community partners only coming on board once the funding to enable them to participate had been secured. However, having started life as a university-led project it had been envisaged that once the research group was up and running that they would increasingly take a lead in determining the priorities and direction of the project. In retrospect this was to underestimate the power dynamics involved of working with individuals who come from marginalised and excluded groups.

Issues associated with the refugee experience interrupted and intervened in the project, often taking precedence. Among the issues to impact on the working of the partnerships were homelessness, a deportation order and fear of travelling on buses following a racist incidence. Like other socially and economically vulnerable groups preoccupations with finding solutions to social situations are often just below the surface. All of these, coupled with everyday pressures of trying to juggle other work, study and home commitments often made it difficult for the whole research group to meet up and the composition of meetings tended to fluctuate with often only two or three partners meeting up at any one time. As the partners came through the university's previous work some of the researchers knew each other. Although they all shared a common agenda of wishing to raise awareness of issues facing refugees and asylum seekers they weren't representing the interests of one single community and instead had their own individual agendas and interests. These factors combined made the process of developing a sense of group identity and common purpose slow, which in turn made it more difficult to establish more equal partnership working between community and university. It was only towards the end of the project that more equal partnership working emerged and the refugee researchers began to feel more confident about making decisions and taking ownership. Unfortunately, by the end of the project one of the partners had been dispersed to another part of the country and one had moved to stay with family in London while his claim for asylum was processed. This backdrop of change and fluctuation gave partnership working an unnervingly slippery and fragile feel.

4. Outputs

- An existing CCE course '*Researching Ourselves*' was adapted and developed to meet the specific needs of refugees who speak English as an additional language.
- 12 refugee researchers trained in research design, methods and data analysis
- Support & training provided for a CCE tutor to work with this group

of learners

- 2 interview questionnaires designed and developed
- 5 refugee researchers conducted 23 life history interviews
- 2 refugee researchers progressing to Higher Education, 1 into self employment
- Project presentation at CUPP conference, University of Brighton, 6 April 2006
- Presentation at Building Bridges: the role of education and employment in refugee integration, Brighthelm Centre, Brighton 27 April 2006
- Presentation at SCUTREA, Leeds University, 3 July 2006
- Presentation at BSKE Dissemination event, Brighton University, 18 July
- Proposed book chapter 'Finding a Voice; refugees in research' in *Mutual benefit: Making university-community partnerships work*.

5. Outcomes

This project is one of a number of projects with refugees that the Centre for Continuing Education has been involved in and it's hard to measure the impact on the university as a whole. Dissemination events where university colleagues have had the opportunity to find out more about the project and the research findings have certainly raised awareness in the academic community of the issues facing refugees and of the knowledge and skills that they have to offer. For example, as a result of our project a colleague in the School of Education has been particularly interested in developing the teacher training curriculum to enable refugee teachers to participate. However, changes in practice in large organisations are slow and incremental processes which need to be assessed over time.

Similarly, the impact on refugee communities has mostly been one of changing perceptions. The project has certainly made a difference to the individual refugee partners involved. Their role as researchers has generally been an empowering one which has enabled them to develop research skills and expertise. It has enabled them to build upon and develop the capacity they already had in, for example, communication skills. These skills and knowledge now exist within the refugee communities, and over time will become a resource which can be drawn upon. Hopefully the way in which the university is perceived by refugee communities has also been changed and will be seen as a place in which refugees can belong and where their contribution is recognised and valued. The impact on the refugee partners is illustrated in the conversations below.

Q. *Has being partners in this project made any difference to you and your lives? Have you learnt anything or benefited from the experience?*

Elena: It's helped me a lot because you see the other people with the same problem and you see how they experience and cope with this and what they do about it. You get ideas from them and you realise that you are not on your own. People around you have the same problems so you can just share your experiences with someone. I think it's helpful for both of you – the researcher and the interviewee. It has had quite an effect on me doing this research; I'm very involved in it. It's even changed my life a little. It's built my confidence and my self esteem. It's also affected my future plans. I've been here for 5 years now and I still can't work in the field that I would like to work, in the field that I used to work in my country because of the exams I need to do. For example English; I have done this a few times now, but I still can't get the score I need for my next exams. Five years have passed already and I keep thinking I should just give up and do any job here. But then doing this research I meet people who have experienced more difficulty in their life and they want to achieve something and they do achieve something no matter what. It gives me the strength to do what I want, to try and achieve what I want in my life and not to just give up. If they can do it, then so can I. That's what I've gained from doing this research. I have learnt how to communicate better with people from different communities, different countries and cultures and different educational backgrounds. It's been very, very interesting learning from so many different people. Being a researcher on this project has helped me develop my confidence. It's also a fast and easy way to learn about life in another country. When you see real people doing things it's easier to learn from them than from a book or the internet. So you pick up ideas from the people you interview. I was interviewing someone and we ended up talking about how he learnt to drive in the UK. It only took 10 or 15 minutes and it was much quicker and easier than trying to find all the information in a book or from the internet.

Jonas This was the first time I've done research and since I also want to go to university to study I thought this would give me a chance to learn things that I might need in the future. I know I will have to do research projects and I thought this project would give me experience of working with people and doing research and interviews. I have learnt how to conduct and do research and how to do interviews. I haven't really learnt anything new about the experience of refugees. The history might be different, but the process of seeking asylum is more or less the same. What they experience, what they need to do, how decisions are made. It's the same for them as it was for me.

Q. *Do you think this project, which has involved the university and refugees working in partnership has made a difference to refugee communities in Brighton and Hove?*

Jonas It's difficult to know whether it makes a difference to refugee communities. They think it's better that their voices are heard and they know something will come out of this research. Maybe an article, maybe people's awareness will be increased. They know there won't be drastic changes tomorrow, but they want to

participate; they want their voices to be heard, they don't want to keep quiet.

6. Sustainability

Of the three researchers who remain in Brighton and involved in the project 1 is now at university studying for a postgraduate qualification and one is due to start a degree this October. The third has just completed training as a holistic therapist. It is hoped that the proposed book chapter and their research training will support all three in establishing themselves here in the UK.

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