

Introduction

West End Refugee Service (WERS) is a registered charity supporting asylum seekers and refugees in Newcastle upon Tyne. WERS has been delivering services to asylum seekers and refugees in Newcastle for more than 16 years. From 2015 to 2016 WERS supported more clients than ever before – 520 from 52 different countries of origin.

Refugees and asylum seekers are ordinary people facing extraordinary struggles. Being an asylum seeker in the UK is very tough, as the UK doesn't even provide a standard induction programme for new arrivals. Instead they must acquire knowledge about living and working in the UK from existing networks. Many have been tortured, imprisoned or raped in their home country and all have suffered bereavement and separation from family and friends. The situation is then worsened by the fact life in the UK only brings further problems and challenges they must overcome. As an asylum seeker in Britain, they suffer the following; low income, social isolation, racial harassment unemployment, prolonged separation from family, difficulties with cultural adaptation and the fear of being returned to dangerous situations should their asylum applications be unsuccessful.

If this wasn't enough, the negative perception of refugees and asylum seekers we receive from media reports only makes things worse. Refugees and asylum seekers always seems to be a reoccurring theme within the media and the level of media attention is directed towards the issue of immigration in general and the situation of asylum seekers and refugees in particular has been intense. The tabloid press has featured the issue many times in its banner front-page headlines to whip up public opposition to Government policy on asylum. Most of the popular newspaper press coverage of the situation of asylum seekers and refugees has been extremely negative, which in all only makes it harder for them to settle in. Rarely in the press and the media is there any attempt to empathise with the situation of asylum seekers themselves and to understand how they experience this barrage of negative attention while they are attempting to settle here and rebuild their lives. Neither is there any significant attention paid to the actual contribution or potential contribution that refugees and asylum seekers actually make to our society in social, cultural and economic terms.

With lack of educational and employment opportunities this means many were left jobless and therefore struggled to integrate into society. With hostility from local communities this created a hostile and unfriendly climate, which did little to aid the integration process of refugees. Although things have improved slightly, much still needs to be done to create an inclusive and welcoming society, which recognises the enormous contribution the refugees can make to the economy of the UK. The skills and interests audit, although done on a small scale is just the first step for WERS, and hopefully this will offset more ideas as to how we can help the refugees feel more at home and help integrate them into society.

The objective of this research was to explore the skills and qualifications of refugees in Newcastle upon Tyne. Britain is failing to make the most of expertise in crucial sectors of the economy because many highly qualified refugees are being ignored. To date, there has been relatively little wide-scale information available on the skills and interests of refugees. However skills audits of this kind have been carried out previously, but on a much larger scale across the whole of the United Kingdom. One of the largest ever skills audit of refugees undertaken in the UK was conducted by the Immigration Research and Statistics Service of the Home Office. This saw over 3,700 questionnaires posted to people who received a positive decision on their asylum application between November 2002 and February 2003, and almost 2,000 completed questionnaires were returned. This research highlighted that asylum seeker, refugee and migrant communities possess a wide variety of useful skills which could be used to benefit both them and their communities and that there are high levels of motivation to volunteer and to gain further skills. This is what we hope to get out of our audit we carried out at WERS. Through our 80 questionnaires we have found a wide range of skills, showing just how extraordinary these people are and how after everything they have been through, still want to give back to the community and do anything they can to better their lives and that of their families. On the basis of our findings recommendations include suggestions on how to harness the motivation demonstrated by the asylum seekers and refugees and how to use information found on interests to encourage further engagement. The main aim of the audit is to hopefully meet the needs and aspirations of the refugee and asylum seeker community. One of our key recommendations is to ensure that a wide variety of volunteering opportunities are made available through links with a range of organisations.

We want to assess a range of factors, which may help asylum seekers and refugees to settle in Newcastle, play a part in its development and make a contribution to its economic, cultural and social well-being. Asylum seekers and refugees have the potential to make a significant contribution to British society in economic terms particularly in areas where there are significant labour shortages, most particularly in the London and the South East. Allowing and encouraging asylum seekers to work once they have gained refugee status is not just beneficial to the economy, but also helps to integrate refugees into British Society and enrich its culture.

This skills and interests audit demonstrates that many refugees have valuable skills and experience, which can benefit the community of Newcastle. Increased awareness of this could help to change the public perceptions, foster the community cohesion and aid integration into society. One our suggestions is to provide further education and voluntary roles which will be the first step in helping refugees into sustainable jobs and assisting their integration.

For the purpose of this report the following terminology needs to be clarified:

- Asylum seeker: A person who has left their country of origin for fear of persecution and has applied for asylum in another country but whose

application has not been decided on yet. Asylum seekers do not have permission to do paid work in the UK.

- Refugee: A person whose asylum application has been successful and who has received permission to stay in another country. A refugee in the UK has permission to work.

Decision Making

Discussions and debates were held at WERS along with talks as a group as to what the best approach to handling the interviews and questionnaires. We looked at the following:

- What do we want to find out?
- How will we get the information?
- Who do we interview?

Some further considerations were taken into account including:

1. How long should the interview take? as a team we discussed how many questions would be too many or too little in order to keep the interviewee engaged.
2. How much time have we got? we had to be realistic about the tight timescale we had and work out with the team and WERS when would be best for us to come in and whether it would be more effective to do it in a team or individually. We had to complete the project within which we also had limited time to analyse the data and record it.
3. Where certain questions should be asked? for example if some questions were asked early in the interview would they encourage or hinder participation and engagement. We discussed this as a team and if some questions were worded incorrectly or positioned at the wrong time this could almost sound like 'Home Office' questions which would greatly hinder participation and impair trust between interviewer and interviewees.

The Questions

As a team we decided on the following:

- The questions should flow with due care and respect for the interviewee.
- Wording questions in a way which would be better understood by the interview and taking into account that English may not be their first language so wording and if need be acting out in many cases the sport we was talking about.
- Make less formal as being often asked questions by the 'Home Office' get to know them and just engage in general chat and ensure the questionnaire wasn't taken too serious to ensure higher participation

Logistics

- **Interviews would be carried out in person at WERS.**
- **We had the opportunity to do home visits with the WERS team but due to limited time this wasn't possible.**
- **Also had the opportunity to go out of WERS to the HubHub support group to access a wider range of people and more non clients but this was turned down.**
- **Interviews could be done in English only as we had limited resources and could not get translators in.**

Objectives:

1. To identify/audit existing skills, experience and qualification of existing members.
2. To provide information about the RMFM to enable members to make informed decisions about getting involved.
3. To have up to date information on members interests and skills so that relevant training and development opportunities could be made available to them.

Ethics

Research ethics and confidentiality were covered and discussed as part of the training. We decided:

- Personal information would not leave WERS and the data recorded was to have no personal information within it.
- Each interviewee should be told that they had the right not to answer a question and to stop the interview at any time.
- Interviewees didn't have to give any personal contact details if they didn't want to and if so this would not leave WERS.

Barriers and Constraints

1. Time constraints: made it difficult for some of the team to attend all sessions due to university timetable – small space of time to carry out questionnaires. Didn't meet the goal number: 250 – only 80
2. Terminology: Presented a challenge translating certain things and some interests were not common to the interviewees
3. Language: With the team only being able to speak English and having no translators this meant more people were unable to answer questions due to the language barrier.

Findings:

- Findings illustrate diversity within refugee community
- Refugee population is an enterprising one and promoting self-employment might be considered as one way of engaging them in labour market
- This project has highlighted difficulties of analysing and reporting the skill levels of migrants and asylum seekers.

Adaptations:

Things we did to overcome obstacles that we faced.

→ Some refugees occasionally felt intimidated when they saw how much personal information we asked for at the start of the survey, as they didn't know us very well. To solve this issue, we began to do the survey backwards, and ask for things such as country of origin at the end of the survey once we had chance to build up a rapport. This meant that a lot more people completed the survey, and felt a lot more comfortable doing so.

→ Unfortunately, sometimes clients felt that the survey was more of an interview regarding what kind of jobs they would be willing to do, rather than what they had skills in or were interested in, therefore seemed desperate to prove that they would work any job available. By emphasising that we were asked to do the survey by Lindsay and WERS, and what we were hoping to do with the information, we tried to find out peoples true passions rather than what they were simply willing to do.

→ Similarly, as refugees have often had a traumatic experience with people of authority, there was a possibility that they may have been suspicious of us, or think we were from the home office, therefore skew their answers to what they think the government might be looking for. To avoid this we tried to spend as much time as possible in the refugee service before we started conducting the surveys, in order for clients to get used to our faces. We also emphasised that it was for WERS, Lindsay had asked us to do it, in which case they often became more eager to answer to give something back to the charity that has helped them so much.

→ In cases of clients that weren't very confident in their language skills, other refugees who could speak those languages often stepped in and helped us by acting as a translator. This helped us gain a wider variety of responses, not isolate the non-English speakers and made surveying an overall more friendly sociable experience.

→ In terms of clients who said no, we documented over 40. In some of these cases there was nothing we could do, but others were more willing to answer the questions on alternative dates, or after they had seen their friends participating.

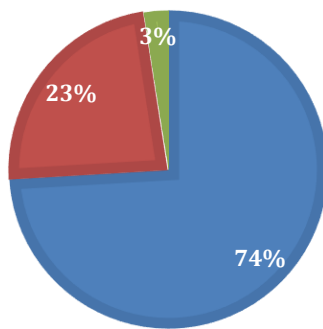
Results

Demographics: Gender

Gender	No of clients	Survey Respondents
Male	416	60
Female	144	19
Total	560	81 (2 unknown)

RESPONDENTS

■ Male ■ Female ■ Unknown

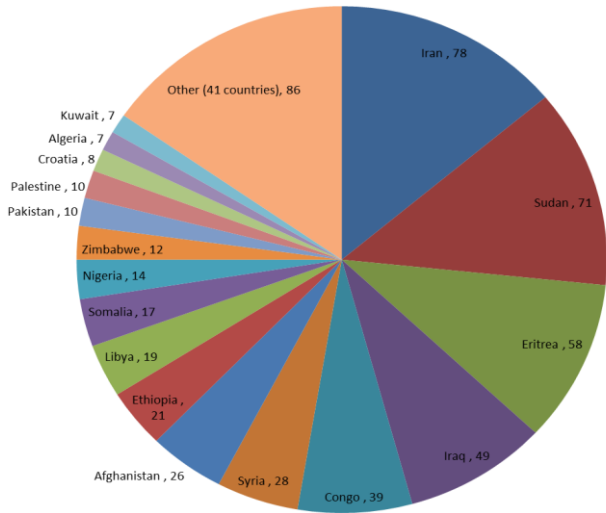


Although a lot more men responded to the survey than women, this was to be expected, as it is in the nature of the West End Refugee Service clientele and asylum seekers in general. In the UK around 78% of asylum applications are made by men (The Refugee Council) and 74% of WERS clients are male. The results in itself could suggest a lot about the nature of the asylum process, who is able to flee from persecution and why they might have to. We feel that this 'balance' of male to female may be due to two factors:

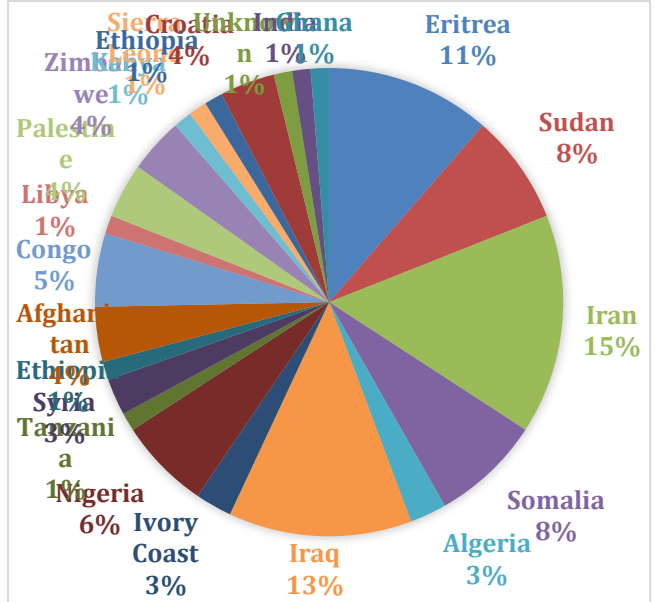
1. Perhaps the tendency is that men migrate first as head of their families
2. Men may feel marginalised in terms of their skills and work in the UK (and their status within the home) therefore feel they want to have their voices heard, in some cases maybe more so than women.

Country of Origin: Where do the WERS clients come from in comparison to our respondents?

West End Refugee Service Clientele Country of Origin



Survey Respondents Country of Origin



Iran	78 (14%)
Sudan	71 (12.6%)
Eritrea	58 (10%)
Iraq	49 (8.75%)
Congo	39 (7%)
Syria	28 (5%)

Iran	12 (15%)
Iraq	10 (12.5%)
Eritrea	9 (11.25%)
Sudan	6 (7.5%)
Somalia	6 (7.5%)
Nigeria	5 (6.25%)

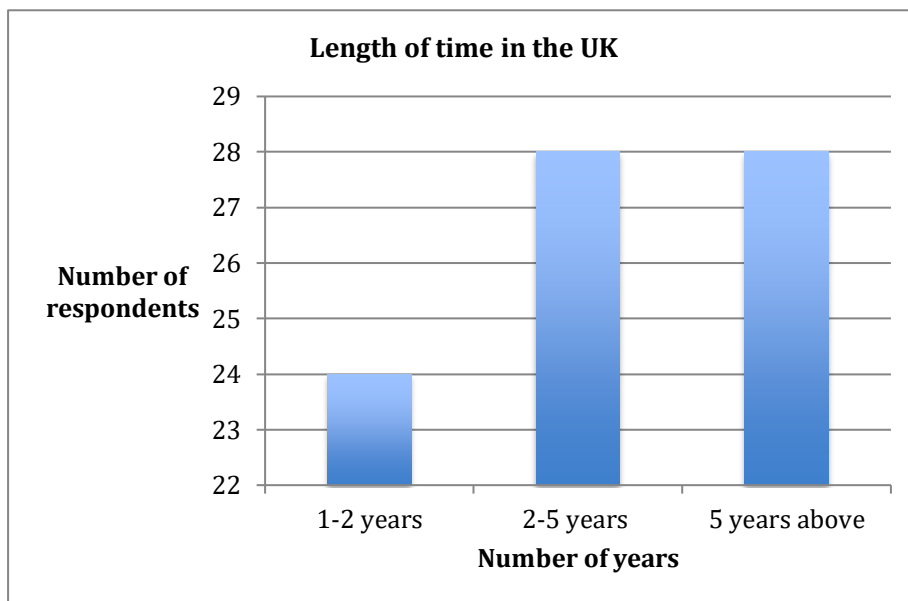
Top 6 Countries Compared:

Done by random sampling technique, we did not make our surveys purposefully exactly representative of the WERS clientele, as this would have been incredibly tricky and not necessarily contribute to our findings. However, the results show close relationships between the respondents of the data we collected and WERS clients in general. Iran was the biggest country of origin for both, and we achieved a very similar proportion of clients (14% to 15%). Iraqi refugees were the second most likely to answer our surveys, at 12.5%, yet constitute just 8.75% of the client base. This could suggest something about Iraqi refugees in particular, perhaps that they use the service more than other refugees, that they're more open about their experiences and willing to answer questions, or that their English skills are better and they felt more confident talking to us. One surprising thing was the amount of people from Syria who use the West End Refugee Service. At 5% of the clientele, Syrians are in the top 6 countries that WERS provides services to, yet during our surveys we only interviewed 2 people from Syria (2.5%). In further research, we would analyse why these gaps/increases occur and how they have impacted our findings.

Time in the UK	Number of respondents
1-2 years	24
2-5 years	28
5 years above	28

This graph illustrates that the majority of the interviewees had lived in UK for 5 years or more; 28 in total. Also 28 interviewees had lived in UK between 2 and 5 years. 24 of the interviewees had lived in the UK for less than 2 years.

We felt the 'newly' arrived communities i.e. those who have been here for up to 1 year may not yet know about 'local networks' or 'systems' to enable them to get involved in community activity which might explain the lack of representation in the research. Therefore one recommendation we would make is that WERS should help these newly arrived people and ensure they do have the right connections and know about local networks to ensure they can flourish better in Newcastle.

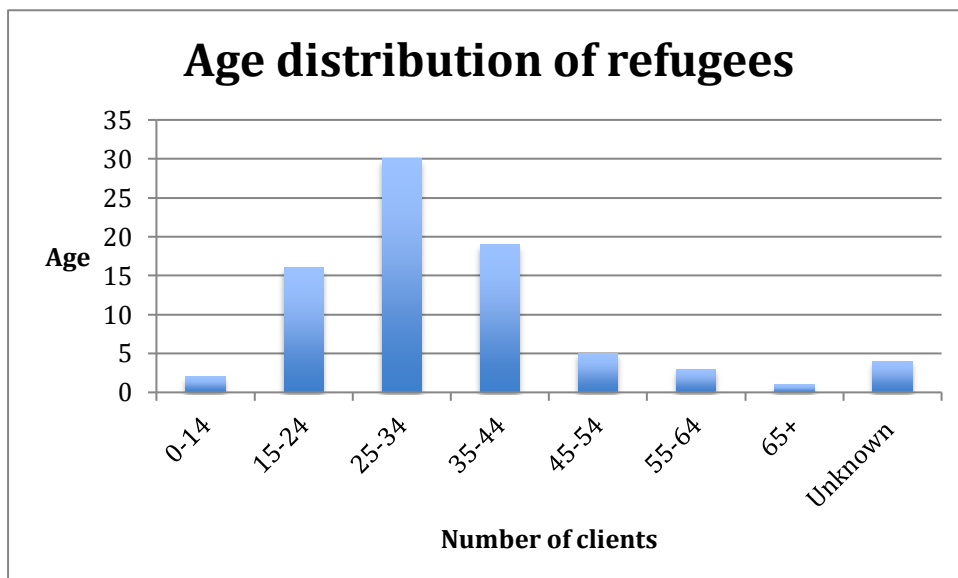


Age distribution

Age Range	No of clients
0-14	2
15-24	16
25-34	30
35-44	19
45-54	5
55-64	3
65+	1
Unknown	4
Total	80

Illustrates that the majority of interviewees were between the 26-45 years age group. This reflected that the age that people tend to migrate i.e. within the 26 years to 34 years age bracket.

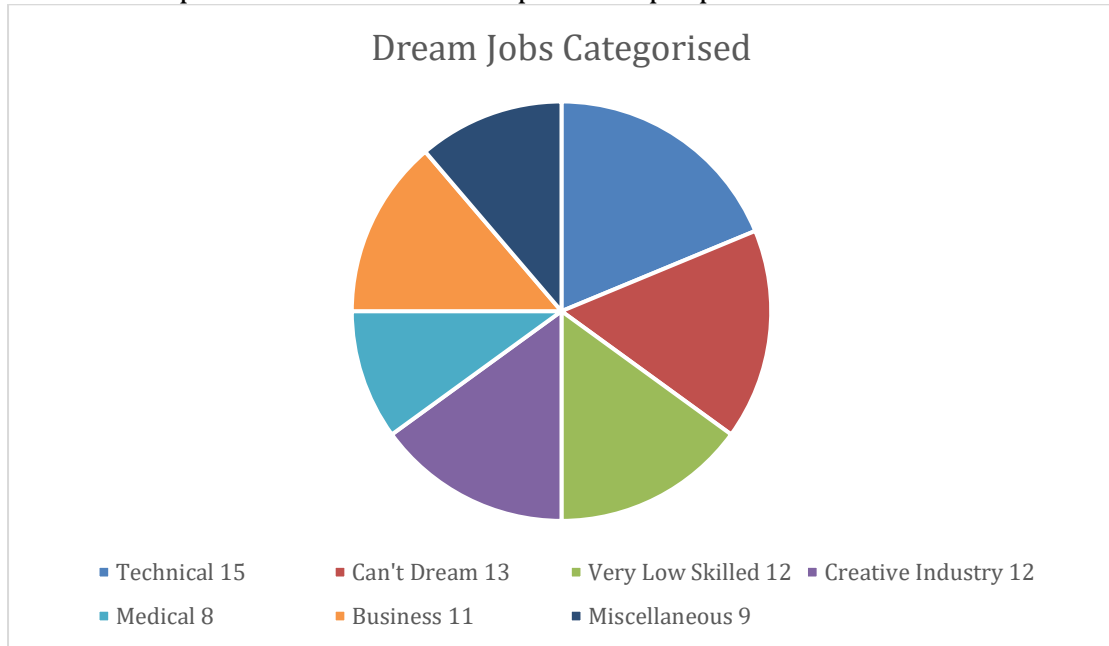
In many countries, migration is seen as a rite of passage for young people. Children may migrate in search of work, education, or simply to mark a transition into adolescence or young adulthood.



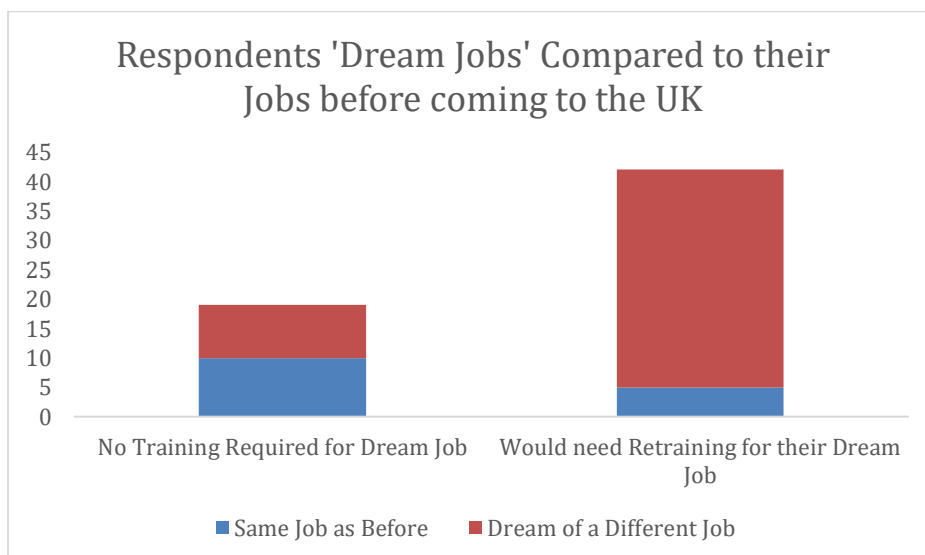
Careers and Career Aspirations

We asked each respondent details on whether they had a job in their country of origin, and what their dream job may be here in the UK. This gave us an insight into what kind of lives the clients imagine for themselves here and what kind of career they would genuinely want to pursue if there were no barriers.

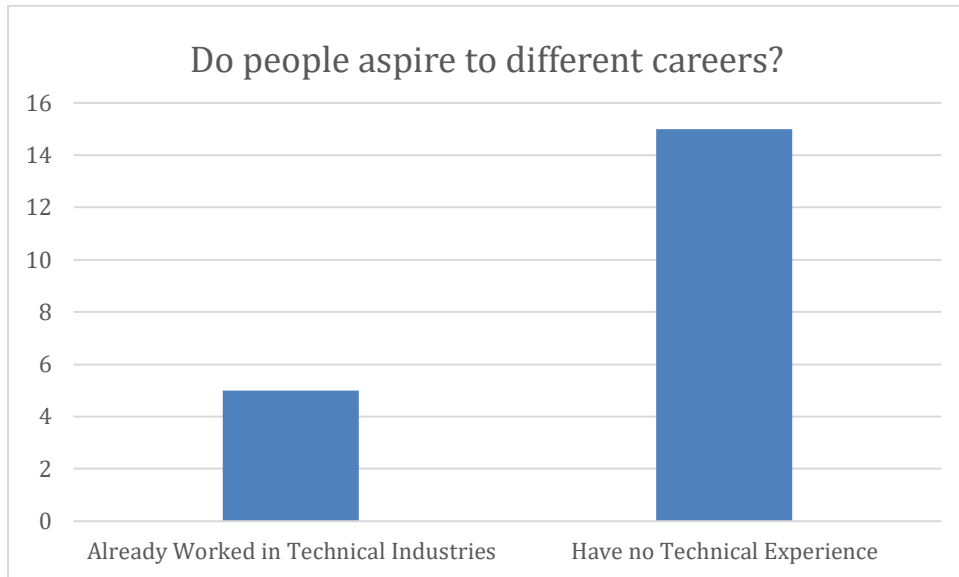
Surprisingly, the answers were incredibly varied in terms of 'dream jobs', with a wide range of fields and a wide range of training and qualifications required to pursue the jobs. However, they can be loosely categorised into the following in order to see patterns in the kind of aspirations people have.



Whether clients would need re-training is of particular interest as it determines whether they could feasibly go straight into their dream job here in the UK. As only 15 respondents confessed that their previous job before was their dream job in the UK (5 of whom would likely need to qualify in Britain), the majority of clients would require further education to pursue their aspirations.

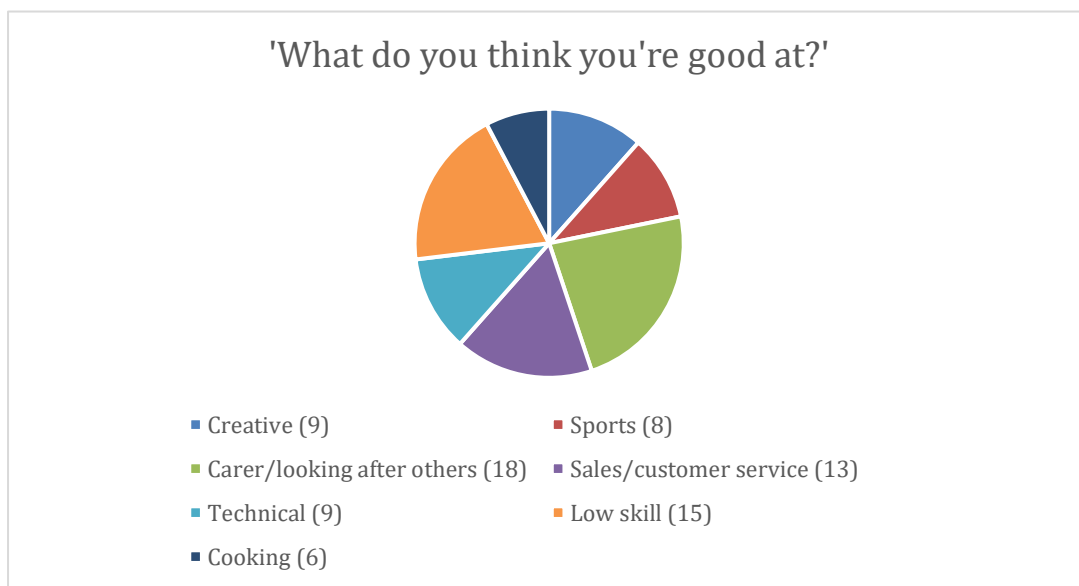


One category that continued to crop up was the technical industry. Many respondents (15) cited that they would like jobs in electrics, engineering, mechanics etc., yet only 5 clients had done those jobs previously. Similarly, 8 respondents wanted to pursue medical careers, despite never having worked in this field before. This could suggest something about the skills valued in different societies and how it shapes what we view as a meaningful career.



What Do Clients think they're Good at?

To gain further insight into the lives of the WERS clients and to keep the audit personal and not too formal, one question we asked was 'what do you think you're good at?' This information is important as it would help to get clients involved in jobs/activities that they like and excel.

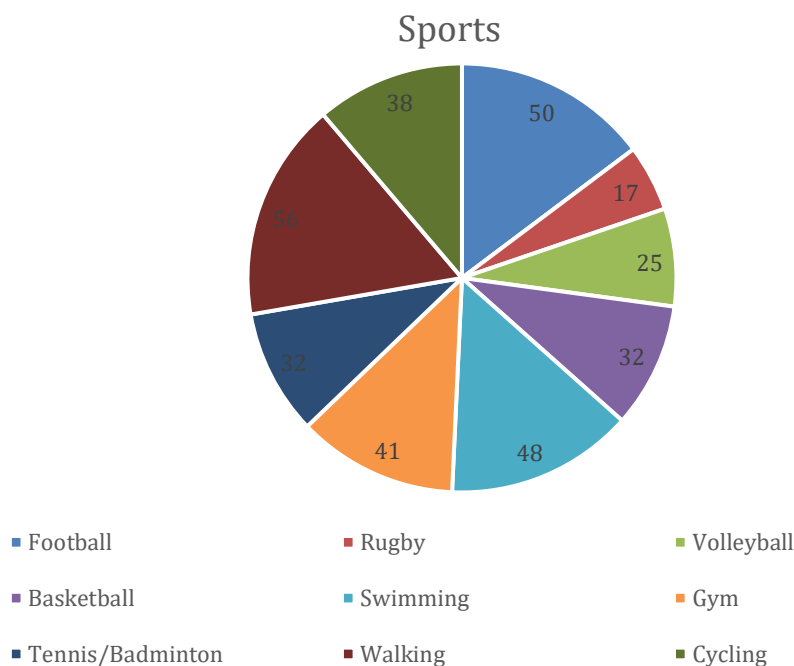


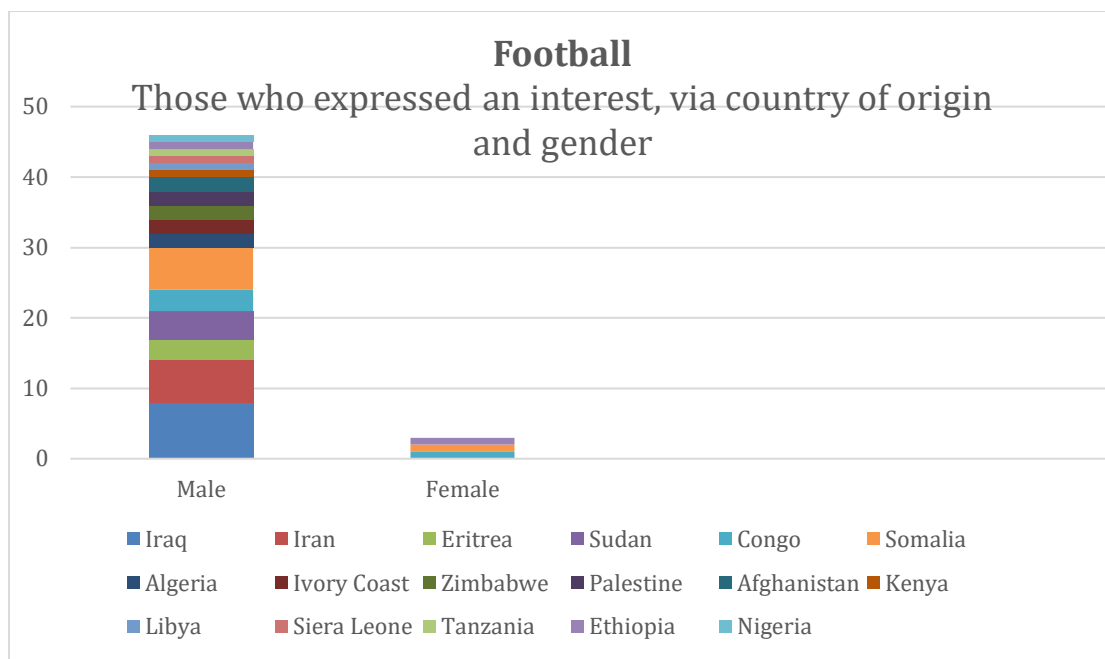
The answer with the highest number of responses was working in a job looking after people. One girl I spoke to was in college, training to be a Carer working with elderly people, and others had worked in the field before coming to the UK, but may not have had the relevant qualifications to work in the UK or couldn't due to restrictions based on their immigration status. Quite a few of the responses were something to do with a sport or creative activity, something which would be relatively easy for them to continue in the UK with some help.

Sports

Of all the respondents to our survey, nearly all expressed an interest in at least one type of sport, with only two respondents not showing an interest in any. The most popular being football, walking and swimming. Although these sports would be easy for WERS clients to get involved in, they may not know of organisations or financial restrictions or, as some respondent mentioned, they may not feel welcome in some places. Some suggestions could be to put clients in contact with local sports teams or, if possible, to facilitate the setting up of sports teams amongst clients. For example, a 5-a-side football team or walking group. The lack of participation in hobbies or leisure activities may result in the feeling of 'otherness' or exclusion from society.

Being involved in sports is important as they become a place for socialising and integration. For some, sports have been so important in their country of origin that being involved in sports in the UK could help make their experience slightly easier and more comfortable. One client that was interviewed spoke of his son's talent for football. Before they had moved to Newcastle, his son had been in the youth teams for the country's national team. Since moving, his son had had trials at some football teams around the North East and as a result, the dramatic change in his life was a bit easier, and could be seen in a more positive way.



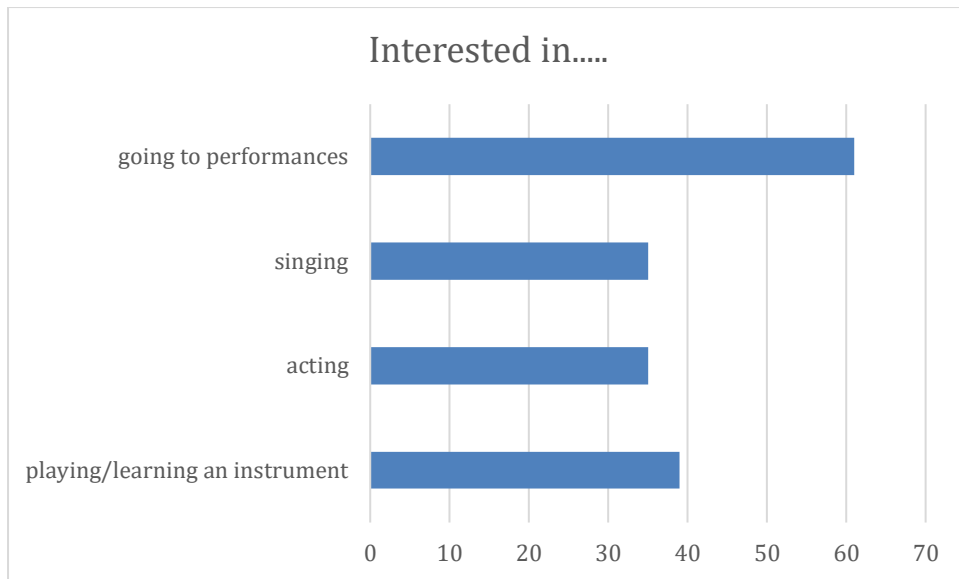


Our results found that men generally expressed more of an interest in sports than women, as the above graph exemplifies. This potentially reflects wider societal gender roles, as women tend to be discouraged from sports from a younger age, as sports often lack 'femininity'. As we have discussed, sports are a great way to get involved in a local community, therefore, if WERS were to go ahead and facilitate any sporting activities, it would be important to encourage women to get involved too, and avoid any double subordination they may experience due to their gender.

Music/Culture

Music was another area in which respondents showed a keen interest, some respondents wanted to continue the hobbies they already had, and others wanted to take up new interests, such as learning a new instrument. 22 of those interviewed could already play an instrument and 17 expressed an interest in learning one (guitar and piano seemed to be the most popular). Altogether, this makes up 39 respondents interested in musical instruments, accounting for almost half of the 80 responses we had.

One way in which more WERS clients could be more involved in music is possibly through Newcastle University. The University has many practice rooms, and there are many students who are studying music or are part of the music society who would be happy to volunteer their time to give music lessons. The surveys also showed an interest among respondents in other areas of culture, such as singing and acting and going to watch performances.



The evidence from the questionnaires suggests that the willingness of asylum seekers and refugees to become involved in volunteering was very high, with a lot of them saying they wanted to do care work or help people in general with a general consensus that they like talking to people and helping others. This suggests that voluntary work would be an important medium through which a majority of asylum seekers and refugees may become more closely involved with the community in Newcastle. There are other routes to cultural and social involvement, which are open to asylum seekers and refugees, most notably in leisure activities. Through leisure activities this can get the refugees and asylum seekers doing more and feeling more part of the community.

From the responses gathered, a relatively small number of respondents had a job since coming to the UK, and even fewer had the same jobs as they had in their country of origin or their dream job. When asked about their dream job, we received a whole range of answers. However, nearly all respondents expressed a desire to work in a job of some description, further discrediting the negative view that refugees come to the UK to purely to rely on the welfare state. The level and diversity of qualifications and experience amongst the respondents really highlight the impact they could have on society, given the opportunity to work and set up a life in the UK.

Recommendations

We feel that a number of recommendations can be made to involve asylum seekers and refugees in leisure, faith and community activity and to ease their transition into voluntary and paid work over time. The responses to the questionnaire suggest that refugees and asylum seekers have a wealth of skills and qualifications and high levels of motivation. However, a number of refugees and asylum seekers who participated in the Audit (and who may have been eligible to work) had not been able to access paid employment. Given that large

numbers of respondents had been waiting some time for a decision on their asylum claim, there may be a risk that refugees' and asylum seekers' motivations may lessen over time, their skills may become out-dated and they could become increasingly socially isolated and less easily integrated into the labour market. So these are our recommendations to ensure this doesn't happen.

Leisure activities

By using WERS this can help the refugees and asylum seekers make connections and get more involved in the community and sports within the local community. This will hopefully ease their transition into the community and keep them more active and give them more of a structure to their day. This can include one of sport events or getting involved in the sport itself, but maybe even through using the Universities and colleges in Newcastle this can be used for this reason and get them more involved in sport.

Monitoring the Skills and Knowledge Portfolio of Asylum Seekers

To collect more detailed and standardised information on asylum seekers skills, education and knowledge, and work experience when they arrive in Newcastle. The approach to collecting this information may usefully be developed from the and the WERS team to monitor changes in the skills portfolio of asylum seekers and refugees over time and communicate these data to agencies and employers offering voluntary work or paid employment opportunities.

Increasing Participation in Voluntary Work

Consideration should be given to developing mechanisms to improve the take up of voluntary work by asylum seekers and refugees. This may involve some further exploration of actual or perceived barriers to volunteering, and to examine patterns of cultural resistance to particular types of voluntary work. A key to success in this area is to explore the best ways of communicating opportunities for voluntary work to asylum seekers and refugees. It would be an advantage if the outcomes of voluntary work experience (in terms of making transitions to paid work) could be monitored over time to help assess the benefits of particular opportunities for individuals.

Information and Advice: Embedding Good Practice

Providing asylum seekers and refugees with information on services and opportunities is an essential part of the process of developing community involvement. It is therefore important to explore ways of further embedding good practice across the Council and between health, police, faith, community and voluntary organisations to ensure that asylum seekers and refugees know about (and are encouraged to gain the maximum benefit from) available services and opportunities. Strengthening linkages with current Community Cohesion interventions may be a valuable starting point for such development.

Implications for policy makers

- Many refugees have valuable skills and experience; awareness of which may help to aid integration
- The refugee community is very diverse and there are marked differences in the level of language skills, qualifications, and experiences of employment

- A lot of the refugees were self-employed before coming to the UK, and promoting self-employment may be one way of helping them to engage with the labour market
- English language skills often seemed limited amongst some nationalities and these needs have to be addressed when promoting refugee integration
- Identify training and employment opportunities as well as a means of enabling refugees to maximize their potential

Conclusion

Overall, our report has demonstrated the wide range of skills and interests among a group of refugees from WERS. We found that there was a huge range of skills, qualifications and interests amongst those we asked. Although we only had 80 responses, the demographics of our respondents are similar to those of the clients at WERS, and so we can assume that they are quite representative. Also, having a smaller number of responses allowed us to talk to clients on a more personal level. One major obstacle facing refugees in employment or volunteering is a lack of English language skills. Although the clients we spoke to had exceptional language skills, many who declined to answer our survey did so based on their lack of language. Furthermore, from the responses we have, a significant amount of respondents answered that they would like to improve their language skills.

The main conclusion that can be taken from this audit is how, even after such hardship and the uprooting of their lives, there is such a desire to engage themselves in their lives here and give back to communities, even in hostile receptions. Also, many of the most popular activities would be easy to get involved in, given the right help and connections. Nearly all our responses had a 'dream job' which they would want to do, as well as a want to become more qualified or skilled in some way, and an interest in a hobby/pass time of some sort.

We hope that this audit has demonstrated what incredible lives these people have. It is easy for people to believe the hostile opinions of the mainstream media that refugees come to the UK because they want to, not because they need to, and that, when in the UK, they don't want to work, and abuse the benefit system. This is completely untrue, as our findings show that refugees have been forced to leave their entire lives behind, and, once here, face many restrictions in being able to rebuild their lives.