Employment for New Scots

Chapter extract from ‘The New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy: A report on the local and international dimensions of integrating refugees in Scotland’.

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# Terminology and list of abbreviations

In line with Scottish Government policy, this report uses the term ‘New Scots’ to refer to: individuals and family members who arrive in Scotland under various refugee resettlement schemes; people who are claiming asylum and resident in Scotland; individuals who receive refugee status or another form of leave such as Humanitarian Protection or Discretionary leave and their family members; people who arrive in Scotland to be reunited with a family member who is a refugee; young people who are claiming or have claimed asylum or have been trafficked into the UK. The New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy is also relevant to other displaced groups such as survivors of human trafficking and people who are stateless.

BAME – Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic

COSLA – Convention of Scottish Local Authorities

LA – Local Authority

LtR – Leave to Remain

NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation

NHS – National Health Service

NSRIDP – New Scots Refugee Integration Delivery Project

NSRIS 2 – New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy (second iteration)

SRC – Scottish Refugee Council

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*“There are so many skills, so many talents, in this group of women. Our work is to help them see that and become more confident so they can work and feel that they have a purpose, a place here”* (Jane, community group)

# Introduction

This publication is a chapter extract from ‘The New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy: A report on the local and international dimensions of integrating refugees in Scotland’.[[1]](#footnote-1) In the main report, we provide interpretive frameworks through which integration can be understood, a comprehensive overview of research findings concerning refugee integration in Scotland, and a series of recommendations to inform the development of the third iteration of the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy. The findings and recommendations presented in this chapter are based on academic research conducted by the University of Glasgow as part of the New Scots Refugee Integration Delivery Project (NSRIDP), a partnership project led by the Scottish Government with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), the Scottish Refugee Council (SRC) and the UNESCO Chair in Refugee Integration through Languages and the Arts (RILA) at the University of Glasgow. The project sought to expand good practice and innovation in the context of integration in Scotland, as well as conduct primary research on refugee integration in Scotland to support the development of the third iteration of the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy (NSRIS).

This chapter extract is focused on employment conditions for New Scots, and puts forward recommendations to help New Scots overcome the structural barriers they experience in gaining employment. With regards to the employability and welfare rights of New Scots, NSRIS 2 aimed to achieve the following:

* Refugees and asylum seekers understand their rights, responsibilities and entitlements, and are able to exercise them to pursue full and independent lives.
* Refugees and asylum seekers are able to access well-coordinated services, which recognise and meet their rights and needs.
* Policy, strategic planning and legislation, which have an impact on refugees and asylum seekers, are informed by their rights, needs and aspirations.[[2]](#footnote-2)

## Structural barriers to employment for New Scots

*“Why can’t there be an assessment of [New Scots’] skills?”* (Linda, Local Authority)

Successfully gaining employment is of huge importance to New Scots: working increases people’s sense of belonging and safety in an area, encourages encounters and connections with the local community, enables New Scots to more easily meet friends and family (through increased availability of resources), produces more opportunities to learn and use other languages and generates both financial independence while improving mental wellbeing through such independence.[[3]](#footnote-3) Yet, people who have been granted refugee status (and with it the right to work) are still severely unemployed and underemployed – even compared to other minority groups in Scotland.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Unemployment levels amongst New Scots with the right to work remain consistent despite their varied backgrounds, experiences, education levels, employment histories and even English language skills, gender and age before arrival in Scotland.[[5]](#footnote-5) Such high levels of unemployment suggests that the barriers that New Scots face in terms of finding employment are predominantly structural ones, created predominantly by UK asylum policy, and are unlikely to be overcome through interventions that target at the individual level.[[6]](#footnote-6)

A primary issue faced by New Scots when attempting to find work following their grant of refugee status is the enforced idleness they have experienced while waiting for the resolution of their asylum claim. Due to UK Government immigration laws, people seeking asylum in the UK can only apply for permission to work if they have waited for more than 12 months for a decision on their initial asylum claim. After the 12-month period lapses, asylum seekers can only apply for jobs specified under Tier 2 of the [Shortage Occupation list](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/skilled-worker-visa-shortage-occupations/skilled-worker-visa-shortage-occupations). However, the occupations listed are severely restricted – creating yet another barrier for employment and integration for people seeking asylum.[[7]](#footnote-7) Furthermore, it is very difficult for asylum applicants to comply with the Tier 2 shortage occupation list in order to access employment, and this clearly affects their opportunities for integration.

The enforced idleness experienced by asylum seekers restricts their opportunities to access labour market and learn English; it also creates a negative stigma around refugees struggling to enter the labour market.[[8]](#footnote-8) New Scots are losing opportunities to acquire necessary language skills or employment-based experiences while waiting for a decision on their asylum case. Moreover, people are very aware of the gap created on their employment histories as a result of enforced idleness which, in turn, also creates a concern that their lack of experience will be a disadvantage.[[9]](#footnote-9) The length of time refugees spent outside the labour market places them at a disadvantage in comparison to other groups of overseas trained migrants.[[10]](#footnote-10) Many New Scots are therefore concerned that their age and lack of recent work experience, in addition to their poorer language skills and lack of cultural familiarity, will severely reduce their chances of gaining employment.[[11]](#footnote-11)

New Scots with skills and qualifications often struggle to gain employment commensurate with their levels of experience. In part this issue relates to the abovementioned enforced idleness (Mulvey 2014). However, there is also a serious lack of means through which New Scots can convert their qualifications for use in Scotland. Research with New Scots who worked as teachers or doctors in their country of origin shows that the need to receive accreditation and/or recognition of their academic and professional qualifications acts as a substantial barrier to gaining similar employment (Pietka-Nykaza 2015). Similarly, LA resettlement officers interviewed for this project repeatedly mentioned New Scots with degrees in subjects such as dentistry and accounting who could not find work or conversion courses; if these people wanted to work in their preferred profession, would have to retrain from scratch. In other cases, respondents noted how lockdown had highlighted the need for New Scots to receive targeted literacy and IT training for employment purposes. At the moment, reflected Denise, “*there are highly-skilled New Scots but no structures in Scotland to meet their employment needs.*” Community groups we interviewed said that women are viewed as being a particularly ‘hard to reach’ group of New Scots in terms of accessing employability training. They also said that much more information needs to be provided concerning employment during the initial stages of integration, and in languages other than English, in order to gain initial uptake and transition into the workforce.

## Racism and discrimination

While the issue of recognising the skills of educated New Scots is an important one, projects and stakeholders that were interviewed as part of this research were also frustrated by employers’ refusal to hire New Scots across a variety of industries. Referring to a New Scot that she has been helping to get into the construction industry, Laura (third sector) indicated that she was now advising him to look for work in England. She explained, *“He has applied for so many jobs [yet] he’s not even had an acknowledgement, it gets embarrassing after a while. He’s extremely competent, speaks English, been on huge projects in Yemen, he’s got his Heriot-Watt University Master’s degree […] but he’s not even had an acknowledgement for any of his applications. It gets to the stage that it’s cringeworthy when we’ve got such well-qualified people, and nobody will give them a chance.”* Similarly, when visiting projects funded by NSRIDP, we encountered New Scots who were fluent in English and who told us they had decided to no longer seek work and to instead aim to become self-employed.

These examples point to issues in Scotland that run beyond the lack of certificate recognition and language; rather they are indicative of wider non-acceptance of migrants from particular backgrounds. One NSRIDP project in particular encountered bias (unconscious or otherwise) against Arabic-speaking New Scots that the project was attempting to help gain employment. An industry training board also ceased involvement in one of the NSRIDP-funded projects, raising concerns among some stakeholders that it had done so because of the backgrounds of the New Scots in the project.

There was also the sense amongst stakeholders that, while some companies and industries might be willing to hire New Scots or to ‘give them a chance’, this is not taking place due to worries that they might not be able to release employees if their placement is unsuccessful (a perceived and unintended consequence of The Equalities Act 2010). Moreover, due to the need for many New Scots to (re)gain qualifications before being able to work in Scotland, they are often only able to apply for entry-level positions – at which point it is often cheaper and easier to hire younger workers with less experience and better English skills. People working with New Scots to help them find employment (or qualifications to gain employment) also reported being faced with, as Eleanor (Local Authority) put it, a *“land of smoke and mirrors”* as they attempted to navigate which qualifications New Scots would need to gain access to certain industries – while recognising that many industries in Scotland still hire based on word of mouth and turn a blind eye to a lack of qualification for some rather than others:

*“The whole area of benchmarking qualifications and skills. It’s just not happening. Everything is there. The website is so slick [but actually] it’s like the land of mirrors, smoke and mirrors. Because all these websites are there [stating] ‘Yes, we can benchmark, and people can have their qualifications ratified, and their skills assessed.’ [But] it’s just a big, black hole.”* (Eleanor, Local Authority)

Stakeholders emphasised the need to focus support efforts on the employment aims of New Scots, especially where individuals are struggling to gain employment through standard routes:

*“[many of the Syrian refugees] are people who like to be entrepreneurs. They like to set up their own businesses with their friends and family […] so your best bet is to support them in doing that.”* (Laura, third sector)

For resettled refugees in particular, interviewed stakeholders believed that there has generally been the assumption that attending ESOL classes will eventually lead to job acquisition. Instead, interviewees emphasised the importance of on-the-job English learning and the need to encourage people into employment both to learn English but also to gain independence. Research from a previous [project](https://www.glimer.eu/beyond-a-one-size-fits-all/) into refugee integration in Scotland highlighted employment successes in Bute, where the resettlement team had placed the career ambitions of individuals at the centre of their support work and supported individuals to launch several enterprises and gain work placements. A number of factors were key to the successes in Bute, including the establishment of good connections with other elements of the Local Authority and local employers.

While New Scots face particular barriers to accessing employment, it is important to contextualise these challenges within the wider context of discrimination and racism in Scotland and beyond. Research by Quillian *et al* (2019),[[12]](#footnote-12) for instance, shows that white applicants in many European countries (including France, Britain and Sweden) are statistically more likely to receive a call-back for job interviews then similarly-qualified non-white job applicants. In Scotland specifically, recent research has highlighted that members of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities continue to suffer from racial discrimination.[[13]](#footnote-13) In particular, researchers Meer *et al[[14]](#footnote-14)* point to the results of the Scottish Parliament’s Equal Opportunities Committee’s (2016) findings: “despite having equivalent education and skills, non-white BAME Scots are more likely to be unemployed or in low-paid work than their white counterparts.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Scottish Government (2015) data shows that in 2013 57.4% of BAME people were in employment compared with 73.8% of non-BAME people.[[16]](#footnote-16) The Scottish Government has undertaken various action plans to tackle racism in Scotland and notably announced the creation of a new Directorate of Equality, Inclusion and Human Rights in 2020. It is therefore essential that NSRIS 3 connects with wider work in this context in order to reduce the barriers facing New Scots to gaining employment commensurate with their skills. Moreover, a conflict transformational approach to unemployment allows the dynamics of labour and employment, historical and within new arrivals, to be seen through a wider lens and for potential pathways to be identified which are appropriate to levels of skill and need.

## Recommendations

* Colleges and Universities should be supported to develop short-term conversion courses in order to recognise the skills and qualifications of New Scots. While there are some initiatives in Scotland aimed at increasing recognition of New Scots’ skills and certificates (such as the Skills Recognition Scotland project piloted through Glasgow Caledonia University), more work is needed in this regard.
* Low levels of New Scots’ skills recognition amongst employers needs to be urgently addressed through training programmes for businesses and increased collaboration between businesses and groups supporting New Scots. Inspiration for such collaborative work can be found in the capacity building initiatives and awareness programmes such as those developed by the Mental Health Foundation as part of their [Voices and Visibility project](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-07/MHF-Scotland-Voices-and-Visibility-Report.pdf), which aimed to increase New Scots’ participation in local communities and decision-making fora in Scotland.
* The issues of New Scots’ under-employment and unemployment across Scotland are closely linked to wider discrimination of BAME groups in Scottish workplaces (see Meer 2018).[[17]](#footnote-17) It is therefore essential that NSRIS 3 recognises such cross-sectoral problems and aligns actions with wider Scottish anti-discrimination legislation and strategies. In particular, NSRIS 3 needs to connect with the work being undertaken by the Scottish Directorate of Equality, Inclusion and Human Rights.
* The employment aims of New Scots should be prioritised, with recognition that many would prefer to establish businesses rather than gain employment. More efforts should be undertaken to support New Scots in setting up their own businesses or becoming self-employed, especially given the difficulties that New Scots experience in gaining correct certifications for employment. Such an approach requires effective intra-departmental working in Local Authorities and better targeted support from Scotland’s Business Gateway.
* A wider recognition of people’s ability to learn English ‘on the job’ is essential to allow New Scots the ability to gain employment and improve their English at the same time.[[18]](#footnote-18)
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7. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Pietka-Nykaza (2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
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16. Scottish Government (2015) Census 2011 Equality Results: Analysis, part two. Available at: www.gov.scot/ publications/analysis-equality-results-2011-censuspart-2/pages/0. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Meer (2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See the ESOL section of the main New Scots report for more information. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)