

Who is supporting the career development of refugees? The role of grassroots organisations

Gill Frigerio & Rabia Nasimi

This article uses a case study approach to explore issues in career development provision for resettled refugees in the UK, with particular reference to the role of grassroots organisations in meeting such needs. Using the Afghanistan and Central Asian Association as a case study, we shed light on the way voluntary organisations support their users in accessing employment, as well as other components of career development. Possible ways for such organisations to complement the work of public employment services with culturally tailored approaches are considered and issues arising identified.



Introduction

Issues of global migration are never far from our news screens. In the UK in recent months this has focused in particular on appropriate immigration policy for after a planned exit from the European Union and the continuing needs of refugees seeking asylum here. Beneath the headlines, these politically sensitive topics translate into hundreds of people with refugee backgrounds seeking to integrate into UK society. In the light of this, research, policy and practice has been developing to explore the most effective ways of providing the support needed for integration of resettling refugees. Support to access work and employment is a component of this. In a literature review of the career guidance needs of asylum seeking, refugee and migrant populations, Reid (2017) notes that whilst there is evidence of some local good practice by statutory agencies, this is not well disseminated or researched. Alongside these statutory services, third sector organisations specialising in support for

these communities in multiple ways have sprung up. Some of these are initiated by host communities, whereas others, such as the Afghanistan and Central Asian Association (ACAA), have been established by community members themselves. We use the term 'grassroots' to refer to such organisations, recognising that they are generated and run by people experiencing first hand the issues addressed.

We begin by identifying a series of issues in career development provision for refugees and go on to introduce the work of one example of a grassroots organisation offering support in this space. Stories of individual users and volunteers are presented to bring to life their experiences. We consider the role such organisations can play in supporting their users in accessing employment, as well as other components of career development, and identify a number of considerations which arise.

Context

Social integration is extremely challenging for refugees and presents specific issues to resolve such as immigration status (including permission to work), language learning and cultural familiarisation, before sustainable employment is achievable. Whilst issues of career choice and development are often viewed as the concern of the privileged and might therefore not be the immediate priority of someone seeking basic safety, we define careers work sufficiently broadly to include supporting individuals to access a stable livelihood, no matter how far away from that they may seem at the outset. After all, employment has been shown to enhance integration and promote personal fulfilment and active citizenship as well as to reduce welfare dependency and enhance educational and health

outcomes on an intergenerational basis (Khoo, 1994).

There are significant challenges for statutory career services in meeting the needs of users with a refugee background. Social isolation and expectations of/ experiences with government agencies in their home country or here in the UK can engender suspicion. Compounding these challenges, government-imposed austerity measures and changes to statutory services in England have weakened statutory career development provision, particularly in England (Watts, 2013). One result of this has been for a more fragmented range of provision to emerge with smaller voluntary organisations and social enterprises springing up to meet specific gaps of groups of users and larger welfare organisations branching out into careers work.

Perhaps a more fundamental challenge to careers work with people of refugee background is the cultural legacy of career development practice. The practice of career counselling has largely been developed in homogenous western capitalist contexts with associated focus on autonomy, normative masculinity, and secularity (Bimrose & McNair, 2011). This differs from the cultural context of the vast majority of conflict zones from which people seek asylum. Traditional matching approaches fail to account for intersecting issues faced by refugees and not least the different labour markets involved.

This article is based on a case study approach, using the ACAA as a 'case' or unit of analysis and drawing on multiple data sources. One author is firmly embedded in the history and development of the organisation and the other is an ally and critical friend. We have drawn on user data from drop-in services and material published elsewhere in evaluation of an externally funded project (Thompson, 2018). This alongside the authors' participant observation enables us to gather individual vignettes of users' stories and verbatim accounts, recorded through the organisation's agreed data handling processes, which are reported using pseudonyms throughout. Thus we integrate unstructured observation and evaluative data into a series of analytical points based on emergent themes.

Challenges of this sort of research include data availability and reliability. Organisations like ACAA have to balance carefully detailed record keeping

through monitored registration forms and bespoke evaluation with maintaining an accessible environment, particularly given likely recent experience of immigration services and a formal environment of compliance.

This is also complex data to gather and manage. Recording nationality may result in someone who has achieved British citizenship through application declaring themselves 'British'. Language skills vary and asking about country of origin and details of migration journey could be intrusive and even retraumatising. When interviewing participants for evaluation there is potential for bias and such interviews usually occurs immediately after users' experiences, showing only their initial reaction and learning. The longitudinal approach needed to surface changed behaviour and results is not available. As such, researching such organisations is not easy or often done, so we present this as a 'revelatory case' (Yin, 2009) bringing into the light this unglamorous and unstructured work and noting its value.

The needs analysis undertaken for the EU funded CminaR project (Reid, 2017) identifies a number of priorities, from increased advocacy and engagement with employers to capacity building for career guidance workers. The project has developed resources to upskill public employment service (PES) workers in issues such as migration complexity, use of language in career coaching and supporting cultural adaptation, handling difficulties appropriately without resorting to a deficit model or retraumatising through intrusion and the use of strategies such as reframing difficulties as evidence of resilience and persistence (Atay, Chant, Conrads, Engelen-Kefer, Ferrari, Hertzberg, ..., & Weber, 2018).

As the ACAA has built significant experience of working with this client group, it is our hope that guidance practitioners can also learn from this research and, by surfacing the relevance of their work to employment support, the work of ACAA can be developed still further.

History and Rationale for ACAA

The Nasimi family left Afghanistan in 1999 and were granted asylum in the UK. The experience of settling

Who is supporting the career development of refugees?...

into the UK prompted the family to create the ACAA, starting with organising cultural events and day trips for the Afghan community in London. Since then it helps refugees and newcomers from the isolating feelings which can come with migration.

The charity works with Afghans and Central Asians as well as other refugees living away from their homeland, providing the support, skills and knowledge to live and prosper in the UK through the services detailed here. Cultural and social events continue and the organisation also visits individuals and families in detention.

With bases in Hounslow, Lewisham and also Croydon in London, ACAA has also delivered an outstanding project in Afghanistan, setting up the first citizen's advice centres funded by the Department for International Development (DFID). Recently the ACAA won a Queen's Award for Voluntary Service for their work helping refugees settle in the UK.

English language support

ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) for Integration, funded by the Big Lottery Fund, provides dedicated ESOL class to help migrants integrate into British society. Classes focus on practical English as well as teaching aspects of British culture. The aim is to break down the largest obstacle to integration, employment and success in a new country: the language barrier. The classes are tailored for migrants and address other aspects of integration such as citizenship test, local culture, British politics, and British history, and place a heavy focus on spoken English to enable migrants to thrive. The curriculum includes creating / improving a CV and covering letter and the programme aims that students will engage in further education, volunteering or education and identify that they have become more engaged in their wider communities such as their children's schools.

Tania, a 26-year-old Albanian, joined the programme in June 2018. Having completed high school and university in Greece, where she was a qualified dental technician, her main priority since moving to the UK a year ago has been to improve her basic English in order to find employment. Through goal setting sessions in class her tutor knew she was keen to write a CV

and gain work experience. She was signposted to a food skills training course, some specific lessons were designed on writing CVs and personal statements, filling in a job application, and interview techniques. Since these classes, Tania has been to three job interviews.

Women's project

Funded by the Pilgrim Trust as 'Women's Workshops for Marginalised Muslim Women', 'Women's Tea Corner' provides women-only workshops to facilitate the empowerment and integration of isolated Muslim women from socially conservative backgrounds who were not reached by other government, charity and council services. The evaluation of the first year of activity reports that 172 women attended across 10 workshops, with 80% of women attending more than once. Of the women 44% were from Afghanistan with 16 other countries of origin disclosed from Asia, Africa and the Middle East and Mediterranean.

'My husband doesn't have to take me shopping any more. It's simple stuff. When I want to buy onion or garlic, I know how. I live here and I didn't know basics. I want to go shopping without being scared. I want to go the doctor without anyone else there. Once I wanted to buy spinach. I went into the shop 3 times, I had to go home and get the empty bag. And now I'm learning. I had a GP appointment the other day. It was about female health. I couldn't tell my daughter because I'm embarrassed. I had a translator. I dream of the day I can talk to the doctor without telling someone else. I wasn't sure the translator got it right.' (Zainab)

Ferdowsi supplementary school

The Supplementary School project is ACAA's longest running educational programme, supporting migrant, refugee and underachieving children from predominantly Afghan and disadvantaged backgrounds. Most of the children attending have limited English language skills, have fractured educational histories and struggle in mainstream schools. ACAA aims to assist these students in the core subjects of English, Maths and Science across all key stages. Additionally, ACAA

offers mother-tongue tuition between 12pm and 3pm with some of the students studying Farsi/Pashto for the first two hours before joining the English class for the last hour.

The school determines the level of student's knowledge to create lesson plans tailored to their ability and creates interactive and comprehensive lessons, concentrating on consolidating their existing knowledge and building their confidence and leadership skills. A regular team of volunteer teachers allows students to establish a personal bond with their tutors and ensures parents are updated on their child's progress.

Mudaser, 9 years old, started at the supplementary school with his sister Hena. He identified his main area of weakness as his spelling skills in general. He joined the school to improve his education across Maths, English and Science.

'When I started at the supplementary school, I was clever. Now I've become super clever!'

He feels that his spelling has improved and at school he recently scored 10/10 on a spelling test, which he attributes to the work of the supplementary school homework that ensures he practises spelling certain words as well as improves his general spelling ability. His favourite lessons so far have been the science lessons that covered the digestive system.

'It was very interactive and there were lots of funny parts'. He also enjoyed writing stories in English 'because we get prizes. I got 2nd and 3rd prize for my poems and will hopefully win something for my story'.

A helping hand – mentoring and peer to peer support

The Helping Hand programme provides mentoring and peer-to-peer support for women in difficult life situations. Due to various language and cultural barriers, many refugees experience feelings of isolation, stress, depression and uncertainty upon their arrival in the UK and can struggle to cope without the support

of traditional familial or social networks. Additionally, conservative and religious households may tend to be male-dominated environments, which can engender forced marriage, domestic violence and the normalisation of gender inequality.

The mentoring scheme aims to support isolated women by offering friendly, confidential and tailored advice and guidance. This can in turn reduce isolation and develop support networks amongst potentially isolated or vulnerable refugee women.

Razia came from Afghanistan to study in the UK. However, she struggled with the language and began to experience the feelings of isolation and loneliness common to many of the refugee women. Despite this, Razia's situation improved when Lewisham Social Services put her in contact with ACAA. The social events, mentoring sessions and workshops that she attended have helped bring about a huge boost in Razia's confidence and communication skills. Razia now helps ACAA with administration, which allows her to further develop her communication, reception and administration skills, thus making her more employable. Her mentor has described how her English speaking and writing skills have vastly improved, to the point where she has been able to make a strong CV to aid her in her goal of securing a job in customer service. She also now works in a local charity store.

Community advice clinic

The Community Advice Clinic, which is now based at the Hounslow shop front centre, provides free legal referrals; equips beneficiaries with the tools to access justice; facilitates opportunity, fair treatment and understanding, all in a confidential and comfortable environment. The clinic is staffed by solicitors from local firms working on a pro-bono basis as well as a range of volunteers. As was the case in Lewisham, the majority of issues being raised concern housing, immigration or family matters.

In the period from opening in December 2017 to August 2018, records show 301 users, with 20 employment related queries logged as the *primary* issue. However, many enquiries cover a variety of

Who is supporting the career development of refugees?...

issues and employment might be linked. These more significant interventions are recorded but other queries via telephone or on a more ad hoc nature are not always included in the data. A relatively high proportion of 'British' respondents (70, second only to 84 Afghan) can be attributed to those who have been granted citizenship preferring to report as 'British'.

Rahim is a 16-year-old Afghan male who moved to the UK with his mother and older brother from Germany. After their arrival in London they soon identified a variety of difficulties they would have to integrate into British society. Language and cultural barriers made life very isolating, and caused problems accessing the job market.

Rahim's mother discovered the ACAA through an advertisement for the organisations drop-in sessions. Rahim's mother used the ACAA as a safe space where she could receive emotional and practical support, including ESOL lessons which she attended regularly. For Rahim's mother the opportunity to speak in her native language and freely express her concerns was a small respite from the isolation she had previously felt.

Rahim was also determined to build himself a life in London. ACAA introduced him to a Farsi speaking mentor who was able to assist him in researching college courses. Rahim is now enrolled onto a full-time construction course and was also assisted in successfully applying for financial assistance from his college.

With his mother's financial difficulties in mind, Rahim sought a part time job. An ACAA volunteer assisted him in creating a CV and gave advice that improved his interview skills and confidence. Remarkably, Rahim was successful in finding a job within a week. Through work and college he has significantly improved his English language skills. He has also applied to begin volunteering for ACAA so that he will be able to support other members of the community, while increasing his working experience.

Volunteering opportunities

Volunteers are central to the work of ACAA, offering the opportunity for personal development through

placements in strategic development, legal affairs, teaching, event management and mentoring. Volunteers have the opportunity to work in every aspect of the charity and gain a true understanding of how a grassroots organisation is able to help disadvantaged communities. Beneficiaries turned volunteers are able to use this experience on applications for jobs and courses.

'Volunteering at the Women's Tea Corner on Saturdays has been highly fulfilling and interesting. The volunteers are well integrated into the sessions, with many being able to head workshops on their topic of choice. Furthermore, as an Afghan immigrant myself, it is extremely satisfying to aid other immigrants and refugees from Afghanistan and around the world in integrating better into their respective communities.' (Yasmin)

Conclusion

Whilst paid employment is 'perhaps the most significant mechanism, for the re-integration of refugees into mainstream society' (Newman et al., 2018 p.4), the CminaR research shows the complex range of needs. A number of themes emerge from these accounts demonstrating the holistic way organisations like ACAA can support their users' transitions to employment. First, it is important to note that employment support is integrated within wider services such as language learning, drop in advice and mentoring schemes. Employment related goals can be agreed as they emerge based on understanding of the individual's needs and can arise after initial contact for immigration, housing or legal queries. The term 'career' is not used. Volunteers report that productive discussions focus instead on work and livelihood, how people spend their time and their personal strengths.

Second, initiatives can be tailored and targeted when this is needed to make them accessible, particularly evidenced by those targeted at women and at young people. These address specific disadvantage such as gender based exclusion or educational disruption, but benefits also cascade. For example, young people benefit directly from the Saturday school and indirectly from the women's project, as women report being more confident in engaging with their children's schools and supporting their education.

Language support is shown to be critical, not just in the practicalities of being employable but also the affective links between language confidence and aspiration. Engaging with users in their mother tongue when needed is invaluable and can draw them in to services where their English will improve.

Cultural connection is central to the way trust is developed with clients. In particular, ACAA staff and volunteers understand more of the labour markets from which their clients have arrived and demonstrate empathy with the gaps in their history whilst unable to work due to fractured journeys and length immigration proceedings. It is notable that the case studies do not just pertain to those who have arrived as refugees, or arrived from Afghanistan; all forms of migration are evident. Trust is developed through a focus on what clients have in common as migrants rather than differentiating by a factor relating to their past, potentially transmitting stigma and reproducing disadvantage.

With a model placing primacy on the development of social support and community bonds, ACAA users can receive many benefits relating to their career development. Whilst at the outset the majority of users are a long way from the labour market ACAA articulate a 'journey of change' which shows how the range of service inputs leads to a variety of outputs linked to cumulative stages of change. This begins with...

- **establishing attendance and developing relationships; and moves through...**
- **contributing, either through sharing stories or bringing food, to end with...**
- **progressively greater integration allows for referral to external services (such as a PES), until...**
- **newly found knowledge, skills and connections can be shared with others.**

(Thompson, 2018)

Jobs and work might be part of this final stage. This shows how grassroots organisations can engage people a long way from the labour market and take them there through this journey.

The CminaR needs analysis concludes that refugees

need inclusive, non-'othering' services which do not stigmatise their difference, and support from those who view their experiences as an asset rather than a problem, affirming their strengths rather than highlighting their deficits. ACAA are positioned to do just that. That said, some staff and volunteers lack formal training in career guidance theory and practice and the connections with the labour market needed to advocate for refugee clients. Whilst the CminaR material is written for those already trained in career development work, we suggest that a complementary programme training grassroots volunteers in particular forms of career support could lead to mutually beneficial collaboration and cross referral. A combination of grassroots and statutory services working in partnership may yet be the most effective way to meet the complex career development needs of those with refugee backgrounds.



References

- Atay, S., Chant, A., Conrads, R., Engelen-Kefer, U., Ferrari, L., Hertzberg, F., Hirasawa, K., Gulmez, N., Kohn, K-H. P., Mir Ghaffari, D., Reid, H., Sgaramella, T., Sundelin, A & Weber, P. (2018) *CminaR: teaching career counsellors of refugees*. Mannheim, Germany.
- Bimrose, J & McNair, S. (2011) Career support for migrants: Transformation or adaptation? *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 78: 325-333. doi: 10.1016/j.jvb.2011.03.012
- Hammond, M. & Wellington, J. (2013) *Research methods: The key concepts*. Abingdon: Routledge
- Khoo, S. E. (1994) Correlates of welfare dependency among immigrants in Australia. *The International Migration Review*, 28, 68-92. doi: 10.1177/019791839402800104
- Newman, A., Bimrose, J., Nielsen, I. & Zacher, H. (2018) Vocational behavior of refugees: How do refugees seek employment, overcome work-related challenges, and navigate their careers?, *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 105, 1-5. doi: 10.1016/j.jvb.2018.01.007

Who is supporting the career development of refugees?...

Reid, H. (2017) *What do practitioners need to know about the career guidance needs and experiences of asylum-seeking, refugee and migrant populations?* Paper presented at the International Association of Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG) conference, Mexico November 2017

Thompson, N. (2018) *Challenging Stereotypes: women's workshops to empower marginalised Muslim women. Yr 1 Evaluation report.* Pilgrim Trust/Goldsmith's, University of London: London

Watts, A.G. (2013). False dawns, bleak sunset: The coalition government's policies on career guidance. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 41, 442-453. doi: 10.1080/03069885.2012.744956

Yakushko, O., Backhaus, A., Watson, M., Ngaruiya, K., & Gonzalez, J. (2008). Career development concerns of recent immigrants and refugees. *Journal of Career Development*, 34, 4, 362-396. doi: 10.1177/0894845308316292

Yin, R. (2014) *Case Study Research: Design and Methods.* Los Angeles, CA, Sage

For correspondence

Gill Frigerio,
Associate Professor, Centre for Lifelong Learning,
University of Warwick

G.Frigerio@warwick.ac.uk

Rabia Nasimi,
PhD Student,
University of Cambridge

Strategic Development Manager, Afghanistan and
Central Asian Association (ACAA)

Rn386@cam.ac.uk