

Report back on the Volunteering and Asylum Project's Education Seminar, held at NCVO, London, 6 January 2005.

The aim of the seminar was to answer the question, how can mainstream education agencies successfully include asylum-seekers and refugees as volunteers?

The first speaker was **Nora McKenna**, the Children's Education Policy Adviser at The Refugee Council.

She went through brief legal definitions of the terms 'refugee' and 'asylum-seeker' and gave us statistics for the top 9 nationalities currently in the UK seeking asylum, (Iran, China, Somalia, Zimbabwe, Iraq, Pakistan, Eritrea, India and Afghanistan). Home Office research reveals that 33% of asylum-seekers have university degrees, 51% have managerial professional backgrounds and 84% have completed secondary education. In other words, as a group they tend to be better educated than the British host population. However, since the right to work was removed from asylum-seekers in 2002, 75 – 90% of those with status (who can work) are unemployed.

The government is keen to integrate asylum-seekers they prevent from working by encouraging them into voluntary work. They issued guidance on voluntary activity for asylum-seekers on the 12.02.01 (see the Home Office website). The guidance states:

- That the activity must be genuinely voluntary and not be disguised unpaid employment or job substitution
- That expenses are fully refundable, (as actual costs, not as a flat rate).

There was some discussion about the difference between voluntary work and unpaid work. The Refugee Council will always help if a mainstream agency is unclear about this, but as a rule of thumb, voluntary work is a specific, separate activity, often devised to suit the skills of the volunteer within the mainstream agency. Unpaid work is where the agency uses the volunteer's skills to perform something they would normally have to pay for (eg. interpreting).

It is only asylum-seekers who, since 2002, are not allowed to work or do unpaid work. They can only volunteer. Refugees can work, do unpaid work and volunteer as they wish.

Nora mentioned that CRB checks can be a problem when recruiting asylum-seeking volunteers because they won't have been in the country for the requisite 10 years. The way round this is to run the check for the length of time they have been in the UK, obtain references from any UK sources if appropriate and just make sure they are not left alone with children, but always volunteering along side other staff.

We were urged to be inventive with recruitment methods when recruiting from this group, to think about additional support such volunteers might need (eg. thorough induction), the importance of being clear about how to claim expenses and to prepare staff for the arrival of the volunteer(s).

For anyone requiring convincing of the benefits volunteering by refugees and asylum-seekers can bring, we were reminded to read 3 government reports which set out the positive reasons:

- 'Full and Equal Citizens' (2001)
- 'Integration Matters' (2004)
- 'Strength in Diversity' – *"Integration in Britain is not about assimilation into a single homogenous culture, it is a two way process with responsibilities on both new arrivals and established communities."*

Tity Pungi, a refugee from the DRC, then spoke of her various positive experiences of volunteering in schools in Croydon, whilst studying to become an accountant.

Lynne Knight, trainer and development worker from Salusbury WORLD, a charity that supports refugee and asylum-seeking children and families, spoke next.

The charity is based in Salusbury Primary School in West London and the school has a long history of thinking well about the needs of refugees and asylum-seekers. Back in the 1930s, the school offered extra classes in German for refugees from the Nazis. The activities they currently offer include extra English classes, After School and Holiday Club activities, Home-School Liaison, Family Learning, Advice and Advocacy and Training on Social Issues – all with different local partners. Refugee and asylum-seeker volunteers are used in nearly all of the above activities.

The best method of volunteer recruitment is always personal, rather than by letters home to parents asking for volunteers. It's important to get to know potential volunteers eg. through coffee mornings, and find out what skills and interests they have. Salusbury WORLD have found that most refugee communities do not understand the British concept of 'volunteering' and they always use the word 'help' when trying to recruit parents and older siblings to get involved with the school. Thinking outside the box is a must! One of their volunteers is a Columbian refugee who has no English but is an artist. She comes into the school, demonstrates her own art and displays it and helps the children with their art work.

Next up to speak was **Sue Waddington**, European Development Officer for NIACE. Working with various partners for ASSET UK, the partnership aims to test new ways to advance the social and vocational integration of asylum-seekers. In the East Midlands pilot project, ASSET UK has worked with over 500

asylum-seekers and 80% of participants were involved in one or more work-placement.

The main barriers to integration were

- prohibition on asylum-seekers working
- lack of access to information on qualification equivalences
- lack of recognition of work experience outside the UK
- lack of English language proficiency
- lack of financial resources for education and training
- personal problems, eg trauma, loss of confidence, isolation, anxiety and health difficulties

Asylum-seekers benefited from their volunteering experiences

- by using their skills
- learning new skills
- gaining an understanding of the UK and its social and working environment
- practising English
- making new social contacts
- feeling valued
- gaining references and then employment

ASSET UK found placements for asylum-seekers and refugees in every kind of mainstream organisation, including local authorities, hospitals, schools and businesses. The main difficulties encountered were prejudice (thinking that asylum-seekers were just 'takers'), CRB checks, lack of employer knowledge about regulations concerning asylum-seekers and refugees and total lack of understanding about refugee and asylum-seeker backgrounds.

ASSET UK dealt with the above difficulties by offering training for employers, as well as training for asylum-seekers in adult education. They also provided up-to-date information about the law, CRB checks and contributed to a handbook for volunteer managers. Email Sue at sue.waddington@niace.org.uk for more information.

The final speaker before lunch was **Dr. Angela Ellis**, a senior research officer at the Institute for Volunteering Research. She reiterated that the main benefit of volunteering for asylum-seekers and refugees was that it provided evidence of employability and access to a UK reference.

She provided a useful list of general research into the area of volunteering:

- Stopforth, 2001, The Effects of Volunteering on Refugees
- IVR, 2004, Volunteering for All?
- Ellis, 2004, Barriers to Participation in School Governance
- Home Office Citizenship Survey 2001 and 2003

She divided up barriers to volunteering into psychological and practical.

Psychological barriers included fear of over-commitment, lack of confidence, fear of losing welfare benefits and other people's prejudices. Practical barriers included difficulties in finding out about opportunities, over-formal recruitment methods and the costs of volunteering (eg. with regard to transport and child care).

The afternoon workshop I attended was addressed by **Danielle**, a refugee consultant for Croydon LEA. (I did not catch her surname, apologies). Danielle uses a large number of volunteer asylum-seekers and refugees in the 230 schools over which she has responsibility. The kinds of activities they do include supporting children of the same language group as themselves, assisting teachers by giving them information about the background of different groups, mentoring, helping with ICT, language acquisition, maths.

Danielle offers training to volunteers to become community language interpreters and translators and once trained up they obtain employment. She provides certificates for work done, references and puts the best volunteers forward for awards. Fares are always reimbursed and free school lunches are always made available to the volunteers. A volunteering agreement is always carefully worked out with the volunteer so that they know exactly what is expected of them and the school knows exactly what the volunteer can offer. The agreement is always finite but is never shorter than half a term.

Volunteers are used extensively throughout Refugee Week (20 June). They come into schools and talk to small groups of children about their lives. The small groups will have been prepared in advance. Danielle also runs courses for refugee and asylum-seeker volunteers to learn to do public speaking about their lives and experiences to other groups, eg teachers and social workers. She also works closely with ESOL colleges and gets student volunteers to come into schools to do paired reading with refugee children.

Danielle obtains volunteers from advertising widely, but especially by using the local volunteering association. Any organisation wishing to recruit volunteers must NOT use elaborate and formal interview techniques – as this will completely put volunteers off and is counter-productive.

She stressed that Home Office and other sources of funding are widely available for setting up volunteering projects with refugees and asylum-seekers.

As part of the plenary session, **Sir Bernard Crick**, adviser on Citizenship to the Dept. of Education 1998 – 2001 and currently chair of the Advisory Board on Naturalisation and Integration, spoke.

Sir Bernard's definition of citizenship was interesting: "...working together to reach a common objective..."

He recommended we read his report – *Life in the UK – a Journey to Citizenship* (HMSO, Dec 2004), as this is a compendium of all the useful information that new arrivals to the UK and their mentors will need to know.

Ruth Wilson, co-ordinator of the Volunteering and Asylum Project, brought the seminar to a close by reminding us that the seminar's recommendations for the way forward for refugees and asylum-seekers with regard to volunteering in education will be posted on the website – www.tandem-uk.com

Hilary Plews
January 2005