

REFUGEE EXPERIENCES OF FINDING DECENT WORK IN THE AUSTRALIAN CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

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Construction is a major source of employment for refugees in most countries yet there has been a surprising lack of research into their experiences of securing work in the industry. Addressing this gap and also the lack of voice for refugees in the construction management literature, this paper reports the results of a survey of refugees who have worked or attempted to seek work in the Australian construction industry. Findings reveal that the main perceived barriers to securing decent employment in construction relate to lack of local work experience, employers discriminating against refugees and not recognising previous qualifications, skills and experience and both employment agencies and employers not understanding the challenges they face. Government procedures and systems are also perceived to be overly complex. Recommendations are made to address these barriers including initiatives to provide refugees with work experience in the industry, education to break-down negative stereotypes of refugees among employers and simplification and targeting of government and employment agency systems and procedures.

Keywords: decent work, diversity, employment, HRM, migrants, refugees

INTRODUCTION

A refugee is a humanitarian migrant who has been granted the right to stay in a country because of a well-founded fear of being persecuted due to their race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group (United Nations 1951). According to the International Organization for Migration (2018) the number of international refugees has grown continuously since the 1990s and a recent study by Rioseco and Maio (2017) found that the most common jobs for male refugees was in construction. There has been a considerable amount of research into the experiences, both positive and negative, of 'migrants' working in the construction industry in many countries and regions (Loosemore and Chua 2002, Golden and Skibniewski 2009, Missa and Ahmed 2010, Khatleli 2015, Kaminsky and Faust 2018). However, apart from recent research by Loosemore *et al.* (2019) which explored barriers to employment for refugees in construction from a subcontractors' perspective, there has been no research into refugees' experiences of finding decent

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work in the construction industry from their perspective. This is despite refugees seeing construction as a major potential source of employment opportunities and being grossly overrepresented among the ranks of unemployed and under-employed members of the labour force in most countries (Colic-Peisker *et al.*, 2007a, b, Kosny *et al.*, 2017). For example, in the UK the unemployment rate for refugees is 70% (compared to 4% for the wider population) and in Australia, refugees have the highest unemployment rate of any group other than Indigenous people. Furthermore, research shows that 71% of the world refugee population are of working age, they have a very strong motivation to work, and considerable skills, qualifications and experience to contribute to a construction sector which is facing skills shortages in the future (Legrain 2017, International Organization for Migration 2018, CEDA 2019).

Set within this context, the aim of this paper is to address this lack of voice for refugees in construction management research through a survey of perceived barriers to employment of refugees who have experienced searching for decent employment in the Australian construction industry. This research is important given research outside construction which indicates that the construction industry represents a major source of ‘survival work’ for these people due to its large size (it is the world’s largest employer) and the large numbers of low skilled jobs it provides (Hedwards *et al.*, 2017).

Refugee Experiences of Securing Meaningful Employment

The United Nations Economic and Social Council (2006) defines decent work as employment which respects the fundamental rights of workers in terms of conditions of work safety and remuneration and respect for the physical and mental integrity of the worker in the exercise of his/her employment. While there has been little research into the experiences of refugees in securing meaningful employment in the construction industry, there has been considerable research outside of construction which documents the many struggles they can face in finding decent work. This research shows that while refugees are not a homogenous group (skills, qualifications, experience, cultures, nationalities and attributes vary greatly), there also appear to be some common barriers that they face. For example, Olliff (2010) revealed a widespread perception by employers and the community in Australia that refugees should mainly be used for unattractive jobs where there are local labour shortages. Olliff (2010) also pointed to considerable pressures on migrants and refugees to take jobs below their abilities and qualifications due to low incomes and because of a need to support their family and to send money to relatives who remain in unsafe situations overseas. Furthermore, employment agencies (which get paid by the number of people they place into employment in Australia) also place pressure on refugee and migrants to find work as quickly as possible. Once employed, it becomes more difficult for them to leave low-paid and low-skilled jobs due to loss of original skills and missed opportunities for networking and career progression. Wickremasinghe’s (2018) interviews with numerous refugees described a life of disrupted employment and a ‘web of uncertainty’ which makes it hard to compete for work. According to Legrain (2017), Wickramasinghe (2018) and Hiruy (2019), other common barriers to employment faced by refugees and skilled migrants include:

- limited English proficiency (plus lack of options for improving English)
- lack of locally recognised qualifications, work experience and referees
- difficulties in gaining local industry experience
- low recognition of past experience and qualifications

- documents evidencing qualifications are hard to get and require full translation to be useful
- regulatory bodies often prevent qualifications and experience from being recognised
- prohibitive costs for bridging courses to upgrade qualifications
- time taken to get new qualifications
- limited or complex assistance from local government; transportation problems (expensive, limited access, lack of drivers' licence/car)
- visa restrictions which limit working hours, rights and options; lack of affordable housing close to employment
- lack of knowledge of local workplace culture and systems; pressures of juggling employment and domestic responsibilities
- lack of appropriate services to get into work; pressure to accept any job available just to get work (poorly paid, insecure work, part time work, illegal work)
- discrimination in recruitment (bias against migrants/refugees, intimidation in the workplace, religious discrimination, racism in the media and stereotyping of communities)
- difficulties accessing complaints processes.

Mobilising the insights above, the following section describes the methodology we employed to investigate the extent to which these barriers exist for refugees seeking decent work in the Australian construction industry.

METHOD

Data was collected using an anonymous on-line survey of refugees who had sought decent work (both successfully and unsuccessfully) in the Australian construction industry at professional, administrative and trade levels. The survey employed a combination of open, categorical, interval and Likert scaled questions and was pretested and validated in partnership with a major refugee and migrant support agency which provides support for refugees and their families through early intervention programs and activities which have been funded by government. The survey comprised three sections. The first section required respondents to provide general demographic information such as gender, age, first and second languages, ethnicity, religion, years lived in Australia, construction industry experience, qualifications (construction and generic) and visa status. The second section was informed by our detailed literature review as summarised above and designed to explore the experiences of respondents who had successfully found work in the construction industry. Questions included types of work found (part time, full-time, temporary, casual), length of time taken to secure employment, numbers of jobs held, number of applications before securing work, job quality (pay, match to skills/experience, conditions). The third section of the survey was open to all respondents (successful and unsuccessful) and asked questions about barriers to employment covering three main areas: skills barriers (employers not recognising experience and skills, access to training etc); government barriers (employment agencies support, assistance to find and apply for jobs, confusing laws/compliance, access to government support such as child care, visa issues etc); and integration/culture barriers (negative perceptions/discrimination by employers, pay and conditions, employers understanding migrants and refugee workplace

requirements/challenges etc). Factors that compose the barriers to employment from the perspective of refugees were assessed on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = “not a problem” to 5 = “huge problem”.

Purposeful sampling was employed to recruit respondents by selecting them from a sampling frame of individuals who were clients of our partner refugee support agencies in Sydney, Australia. The research team also distributed surveys at a number of refugee employment fairs, refugee construction companies and refugee community forums. Ethics clearance required full disclosure of the aims, objectives, methods involved in the research, and participation rights, to all respondents, all of which was explained via a formal invite that guaranteed anonymity and allowed respondents to withdraw their data at any time. Working with a partner refugee support agency and ensuring anonymity through clear ethical procedures was critical in building trust with our vulnerable respondents. A total of 68 people were formally invited to participate in the survey and 25 usable responses were received as illustrated in Table 1. The formal invitation numbers are low even after translating the survey into relevant languages and working with a major refugee support agency as a partner. This is because many refugees are reluctant to participate in research due to fear of upsetting authorities on which their visa status depends. However, among those invited to participate, the response rate of 35% was strong, especially for studies which address potentially sensitive areas (Marszalek *et al.*, 2011), and given the logistical challenges and sensitivity of our research and the language limitations and time constraints of our respondents.

Following pretesting for Kurtosis and Skewness, the data sample was deemed to be not normally distributed, hence requiring the use of nonparametric methods for further data analysis. To re-affirm the non-normality of the data, a Kolmogorov-Smirnov (KS) was conducted. In order to address the research questions posed in this study, a range of statistical techniques were adopted, including descriptive tests (mean and media), frequencies and the Wilcoxon Signed-Rand test (one-way sample t-test equivalent) (Pratt 1959), Wilcoxon signed rank test was adopted to reveal how likely it is in the population to have a result as in the present sample.

RESULTS

It is important to interpret the following results within the context of our very small sample and the large percentage of Arabic respondents cannot be claimed to be representative of the ethnic profile of migrant population in Sydney (or Australia). Nevertheless, given the many methods used to collect data we have no reason to believe that this is not the ethnic profile of refugees looking for work in construction in Sydney. within this constraint, it is notable in Table 1 that 84% of respondents in our sample were male, while only 16% were female. This reflects De Maio *et al.*'s (2017) findings which shows that males make up the majority of refugees working in construction.

The majority of respondent refugees were 30-39 yrs old and Arabic by background. This presents the first insights that we are aware of, into the ethnic profile of refugees seeking work in construction in Australia. Interestingly this is a starkly different profile to the only ethnicity data of workers in the wider Australian construction industry (Loosemore *et al.*, 2010) where those of Arabic background represented a very small proportion.

This is important since according to Dunn *et al.* (2011), this may cause integration challenges in both seeking work and working within the construction industry, especially since workers from a ‘Middle Eastern’ background were perceived by managers to be the most problematic group.

Table 1: Sample Structure

Topic	Grouping	Percentage %
Gender	Female	16
	Male	84
Age	18 - 29 years	24
	30 - 39 years	40
	40 - 49 years	28
	Over 50 years	8
Construction experience	0 - 4 years	52
	10 - 19 years	8
	5 - 9 years	20
	Over 20 years	20
Current Profession	Accounting	4
	Admin	12
	AEC professionals	64
	Trades	20
Contract Type	No work yet	32
	Casual	16
	Temporary employment (fixed duration)	8
	Full time	44
Education Qualification	High School Education	8
	Masters	24
	Technical Education	8
	Undergraduate	60
Years lived in Australia	0 - 4 years	72
	10 - 19 years	12
	5 - 9 years	12
	Over 20 years	4
Time taken to find work	Less than a year	34
	1 - 2 years	4
	2 - 3 years	20
	3 - 4 years	8
	More than 4 years	4
	No work yet	30
Jobs applied for	1 - 5	20
	5 - 10	12
	15 - 20	8
	More than 20	30
	No work yet	30
Jobs held in past 5 years	1 - 5	64
	5 - 10	6
	No work yet	30
Happy with Job	Average	35.3
	Mostly Happy	23.5
	Very Happy	41.2

In terms of language proficiency, most respondents (52%) nominated Arabic as their first language, and 45% nominated English as their second language. It is reasonable to assume that the remaining 55% would experience significant language difficulties, a common problem recognised in the wider literature (Wickramasinghe 2018). Notably, Trajkovski and Loosemore (2006) found that on construction sites, this lack of language proficiency lead to significantly higher safety risks to both themselves and their co-workers, further exacerbating negative stereotypes among employers and potential problems in securing decent work in the sector. The sample illustrates a highly qualified group with 84% having an undergraduate qualification or above (40% of the sample being Engineers). This profile of education and experience adds further

granularity to other research such as Colic-Peisker *et al.*, 2007a, b) who highlighted the importance of construction as a source of potential refugee employment. However, supporting Krahn *et al.* (2000), our results also show that despite being highly qualified, a high percentage of refugees remain unemployed for a considerable time reflecting research by Hiruy (2019) which points to the precarious nature of employment experienced by this group. While 68% had managed to find work in the construction industry, only 44% had full time employment. Interestingly, no respondents said they were unhappy in their work they had found and 41.5% said they were very happy, which doesn't support other research which suggest that the quality of work provided for refugees by construction is poor (Buckley *et al.*, 2016).

In the following section, the perceived barriers to finding employment in the construction industry for the refugees in our sample are explored in more detail. This discussion is based on Table 2 which ranks the examined barriers based on the Wilcoxon signed-rank test, along with listing the mean and median for each barrier.

Table 2: Perceived barriers to employment by Refugees (in Rank order)

Barriers	Median	Mean	Rank	Not a problem %	Small problem %	Medium problem %	Major problem %	Huge problem %	One-Sample Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test (Z values)
Lack of Australian work experience	4	3.56	1	12	16	12	24	36	3.703*
Employers not recognising my past skills qualifications	4	3.48	2	12	16	20	16	36	3.604*
Complex systems and procedures getting a job	4	3.44	3	8	24	12	28	28	3.63*
Employers not understanding the challenges refugees face	3	3.32	4	8	24	28	8	32	3.494*
Government employment agencies not understanding	3	3.24	5	8	28	24	12	28	3.39*
Discrimination by employers	2	2.84	6	16	36	8	28	12	2.838*
Support from government to get into work	3	3.08	7	20	24	12	16	28	2.693*
Confusing laws and regulations to get work	3	2.68	8	16	32	28	16	8	2.57*
Assistance with applying for jobs	2	2.44	9	12	44	32	12	0	2.296*
Access to information about job opportunities careers in	3	2.64	10	28	20	24	16	12	2.163*
Being forced to take low quality work	2	2.56	11	20	40	12	20	8	2.176*
Access to training and new qualifications	2	2.64	12	28	28	12	16	16	2.093*
Support to setup your own business	2	2.56	13	20	36	24	8	12	2.043*
Language problems	2	2.48	14	20	48	8	12	12	1.818
Poor pay and working conditions	2	2.36	15	16	52	20	4	8	1.565
Discrimination by other workers	2	2.36	16	24	44	12	12	8	1.458
Understanding Australian workplace culture and	2	2.28	17	40	20	24	4	12	0.796
Access to other government support services such as	2	2.2	18	16	60	16	4	4	1.026
Visa problems	2	2	19	4	92	4	0	0	0.000

*The significance level is .050

Thirteen out of 19 barriers examined are significant at $p < .005$, with values ranging between $Z = 2.043$ and $Z = 3.703$. In particular, 36% of respondents found that ‘Lack of Australian work experience’ (rank = 1) was a major problem in terms of securing employment in the Australian construction industry. This reinforces findings in (Pittaway *et al.*, 2009) and (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2007a) where lack of relevant work experience was also deemed a major barrier to employment for refugees. Despite indications in the literature that point to the fact that refugees possess skills that are highly useful in the construction industry (Australian Government, 2019), refugees still perceive “Employers not recognising my past skills qualifications and experience” as a significant barrier to finding employment in the construction industry, with 36% of respondents indicating it as a huge barrier (rank = 2). This result ties in closely with the previous findings of (Tilbury and Colic-Peisker, 2007a), where it was stated that a major hurdle facing refugees when looking for work was the unwillingness of employers to recognise relevant skills that refugees have from their home countries. The 3rd ranked barrier was the ‘Complex systems and procedures getting a job’, supporting wider criticisms of Australia’s employment

system which has been criticised by both employers and job seekers as being overly bureaucratic and complex and not effective at matching employer and employee needs and skills (Commonwealth of Australia 2019). Another significant barrier identified was ‘Employers not understanding the challenges refugees face’ (rank = 4), supporting previous research that cites widespread stigmas against the capability of refugees in terms of their skill sets in the job market (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2007). In Australia this problem has been exacerbated by the commoditisation of refugees and other job seekers in a privatised employment market of private providers which get rewarded by the number of people they place rather than the quality and suitability of those jobs in terms of their suitability to people’s individual qualifications and needs (Bowman and Randrianarisoa 2018, Commonwealth of Australia 2019). This is reflected in the fifth and sixth-ranked barriers “Government employment agencies not understanding challenges” and ‘Lack of Support from government to get into work’. Our results also indicate that ‘Discrimination by employers’ was also viewed as a significant barrier (rank = 6), supporting previous research by Loosemore *et al.* (2010) and Dunn *et al.* (2011) which highlighted considerable levels of discrimination in the Australian construction industry - especially towards people of Middle Eastern origins as in our sample. Outside construction Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2007) have also reported refugees commonly experience discrimination by their employers. Indeed, it is notable in our results that concerns about ‘employers’ represent three out of the top six ranked barriers, suggesting that more needs to be done in educating employers about the potential value of refugees to the industry, the value and nature of their existing qualifications, skills and experience, the challenges they face and addressing negative stereotypes that lead to discriminatory behaviour. Providing refugees with work experience opportunities to address their top ranked barrier is especially important. Notably, with two references to government-related barriers in the top six barriers, our results indicate that governments also need to address the perceived complexities of securing work and the lack of understanding in employment agencies of the special challenges which refugees face.

Lesser barriers considered a small problem or not a problem included: ‘Confusing laws and regulations to get work’, ‘Assistance with applying for jobs’, ‘Access to information about job opportunities and careers’, ‘Being forced to take low quality work’, ‘Poor Access to training and new qualifications’ and ‘Weak Support to setup your own business’. Although not statistically significant and requiring further research to confirm, it is notable that while ‘Language problems’ are often cited as a barrier to employment for refugees (Casimiro *et al.*, 2007, Wickramasinghe 2018); our results do not support this (rank = 14). This contrasts with our findings above in relation to 55% of the sample not nominating English as either their first or second language and may be explained by the Trajkovski and Loosemore (2006), Loosemore *et al.* (2010) and Dunn *et al.* (2011) who found that many languages are spoken on construction sites within culturally distinct work teams, effectively protecting people who do not speak English. However, management level ethnic profiles (primarily the structure of our sample) are less diverse their work also shows that this is a major concern for managers especially in relation to those from a Middle Eastern background and relating to issues such as safety and productivity - which may explain our results relating to high levels of perceived discrimination by employers (ranked 6). Furthermore, supporting our findings about happiness in work, discussed above, ‘Poor pay and working conditions’ was not considered a barrier to employment supporting Rioseco and Maio (2017) who point to construction providing an important source of

good quality work for refugees. Interestingly, in contrast to Dunn et al's (2011) findings, in contrast to 'Discrimination by employers', discrimination by other workers in the construction industry was not seen as a problem. Rather, in support of Raiden *et al.* (2019), it would seem that the construction industry provides a tolerant and supportive environment for workers from other cultures because of the diversity of its workforce and the support structures that provides. Finally, another interesting result yielded from Table 1, and which is contrary to research conducted in Europe and North America (Harney, 2013) is the insignificance of 'Visa Problems' as a barrier perceived by the respondents. Additionally, in contrast to Legrain (2017), respondents' 'understanding Australian work culture' was a low barrier (rank = 17).

CONCLUSION

Set within the context of a growing refugee crisis across the world, the aim of this paper was to address the lack of research into and voice for refugees in construction management research through a survey of perceived barriers to employment of refugees who have experienced searching for decent employment in the Australian construction industry. We note the limitations of our very small sample and that the large percentage of Arabic respondents cannot be claimed to be representative of the ethnic profile of migrant population in Sydney (let alone Australia) where this research was based. However, our findings revealed that the ethnic profile of the refugee population looking for work in the Australian construction industry is significantly different from the current workforce profile, as far as we understand it. While the literature suggest that this may cause integration challenges, our results indicate the contrary in that refugees consider the construction industry a supportive environment to work, at least from fellow workers. Our results suggest that this workforce structure may protect refugees with low English proficiency, although refugee perceptions that employees discriminate against them may reflect manager concerns about the risks this poses to safety and productivity in such a highly regulated industry. While these concerns may be valid, employers emerge as a significant perceived barrier to employment for refugees indicating that more initiatives are also needed to provide refugees with opportunities to gain work experience in the industry and to educate employers about the value and nature of their existing qualifications and experience and the potential value that many refugees could bring to the industry and to break-down negative stereotypes of refugees among employers. Our results indicate that employers would appear to be the main reason why, despite the highly qualified nature of our sample (albeit mainly focussed around engineering) and the obvious knowledge they could bring to the industry, many of our respondents struggled to find work, applying for numerous jobs over a long period and remain unemployed for a considerable time. When they do find work, it is often insecure, although the quality of work, especially pay and working conditions and levels of satisfaction with work appear to be high. However, our results indicate that government employment systems could be significantly simplified and more targeted towards addressing the specific needs of refugees, which are distinct from other job-seeking groups.

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