

The job seeking experiences of refugees and migrants in the Australian construction industry

This is the second in a series of regular fact sheets about recent 'social value' research undertaken into the Australian construction industry. Full research papers are available on request. Please feel free to circulate this fact sheet.

This research set out to explore the job-seeking experiences of migrants and refugees in the Australian construction industry.

Why the study

- The construction industry represents a major source of employment for new migrants and refugees.
- In Australia, the most common jobs for male refugees is in construction and there are twice as many refugee businesses in construction than any other sector.
- However, migrants and refugees are overrepresented among the ranks of unemployed, underemployed, lowly-paid, precariously employed and casualised members of the labour force.
- In Australia, refugees have the highest unemployment rate of any group (other than Indigenous people) and tend to become trapped in a cycle of taking 'survival jobs' in secondary labour market niches just to survive with little prospect of using their skills and knowledge to reach their full potential.
- This is despite having a strong motivation to work and considerable skills, qualifications and experience to contribute to industries like construction.

What we did

- Data was collected using an on-line survey of male and female refugees and migrants who had sought work (both successfully and unsuccessfully) in the Australian construction industry at professional, administrative and trade levels.
- A total of 205 refugees and migrants who had sought work in construction were identified and invited to participate in the survey and 79 usable responses were received (a response rate of 39%).

What we found

- The experiences of refugees and migrants seeking work in the construction industry are broadly the same apart from refugees taking more time to secure a job in construction.
- Previous experience of working in the construction industry is related to the number of jobs applied for and whether the job secured matches a migrants or refugee's previous skills, experience, and expertise.
- The less experience a refugee or migrant has of working in construction overseas and the longer they have lived in Australia, the more likely it is that they will secure a full-time job.
- Those with more overseas construction experience not only experience greater barriers to employment but also tend to apply for more jobs before they secure work.
- The permanence of work found also appears to be related to education, with high school, undergraduate and masters educated migrants and refugees securing full time jobs while PhD's and those with technical education were relegated to part-time and casual work.
- The top six ranked barriers to employment were: Lack of Australian work experience; Employers not recognising past skills qualifications and experience; Lack of support from government; Government employment agencies and employers not understanding the challenges of refugees and migrants in finding work; Complex systems and procedures for getting a job; and Discrimination by employers.
- Surprisingly language proficiency did not appear to be a significant barrier in seeking employment and the findings highlight the potentially important role of the construction industry's cultural diversity in supporting migrants and refugees into work through their informal networks and support structures.
- Language proficiency can however affect long-term career prospects.
- Arabic migrants and refugees need the greatest support to navigate complex employment systems and procedures.
- Getting employment quickly and a job which aligns with ones skills and experience depends on getting locally recognised qualifications, mastering local laws and regulations.

What this means

Recommendations for policy makers and businesses in the construction industry who wish to better harness the potential skills of refugees and migrants include:

- Providing locally recognised work experience through initiatives such as social procurement which require construction firms to provide employment opportunities and company internships;
- Education and training program for refugees and migrants to acquire locally recognised qualifications;
- Educating employers about the challenges which refugees and migrants face in finding decent work;
- Educating employers about techniques to recognise and harness the many benefits which refugees and migrants can bring to the workplace;
- Industry networking events to build the informal networks which are crucial to securing work in construction;
- Addressing potential racism and discrimination in the construction industry both between worker and between workers and managers;
- Equipping refugees and migrants with the skills and knowledge to navigate complex employment systems, procedures, laws and regulations;
- Basing social procurement policies on a better understanding of the barriers identified in this research by consulting more closely with the construction industry and refugees and migrants;
- Reducing the complexity of the formal employment network for both employees and employers;
- Exploring the role of specialised intermediaries in helping both employers and refugees and migrants to navigate pathways to decent employment in construction. Such intermediaries could help to better match employers and job seekers, assist in navigating complex employment systems and procedure, allay perceptions of risk, secure meaningful work and training opportunities and support refugees and migrants in integration into employment.
- Interventions should rely less on trying to prove the relevance of previous qualifications but more on engaging with local education institutions to secure locally recognised qualifications and improve English language skills.
- Providing incentives and support to help refugees and migrants acquire a university education would also seem to be beneficial, suggesting that stronger partnerships between further and technical education institutions and universities should be encouraged.

As for practical implications and recommendations for migrants and refugees, the results indicate that:

- It is important to be realistic in one's expectations compared to one's past, at least in the short-term.
- The chances of securing a high quality job in the construction industry are increased by improving English proficiency, improving understanding of the systems to find decent work and focusing on securing local work experience in construction and locally recognised qualifications.
- Do not rely on government support networks to secure work but to develop one's own social capital by engaging with community-based organisations which appear to be more effective at providing the customised informal networks and resources which are so essential to securing meaningful work in the construction industry.