

# Better training and job outcomes for refugees and migrants

## INTERIM REPORT - 2024 -

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our research aims to improve training and employment outcomes for people from refugee and migrant communities by shaping improvements in access to ESOL<sup>1</sup>, training and work.

We held interviews, focus groups and workshops with 110 people, of which 66 people have lived experience of displacement and migration. The findings highlight these key priorities:

- A common ESOL initial assessment process for the West of England. This would enable potential learners to be signposted and referred directly into suitable, available courses. *What are the implications of a common initial assessment process for your organisation, or stakeholders who you work with?*
- Develop a scheme for recognition and accreditation of prior learning, competence mapping and skills verification. This would be recognised by participating education providers and employers and facilitated by developing an online platform with digital tools. *Are there similar approaches that you are aware of that could inform this?*
- Boost provision of ‘Vocational ESOL’ and ‘ESOL for Work’ courses, which combine language and employability skills training. *What else is needed to make these courses successful?*
- Provide effective and appropriate work experience opportunities for migrants and refugees. *What are the barriers to implementing this more widely?*
- More inclusive and effective recruitment and retention practices by employers. *Can you share examples of good practice that can be replicated?*
- Integrated collaboration between employment, training and support stakeholders to facilitate the above priorities. *What does effective collaboration look like?*



## ABOUT OUR RESEARCH

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We look forward to working with key stakeholders during the launch event for this interim report. We seek your perspectives on these priorities. Are they right? What else is needed? We will collaborate to identify specific actions needed to address these priorities and create change in these areas. The outcomes will be included in our 2024 Final Report.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank our participants who generously shared their lived experience and professional expertise in our interviews, focus groups and workshops. We are indebted to colleagues and organisations in Bristol and the West of England who provided valuable input into the report and supported us to reach such a diverse range of participants. Thanks also to Charly Ramuz, at Community Learning, Bristol City Council, who shared the pilot assessment tool.



# INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

People who seek sanctuary in the UK bring with them a wealth of skills and experiences. An enduring message in our research is that these people have a strong desire to use their skills to find fulfilling work, become financially independent and contribute to their new society. However, they often face enormous barriers to leading fulfilling lives and achieving their potential.

Bristol and the West of England are culturally rich with more than 90 languages spoken, and 12% of people in the West of England Combined Authority area were born outside the UK.<sup>2</sup>

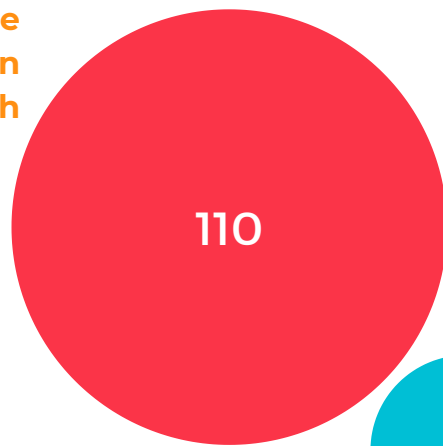


<b>2021 Census Data<sup>3</sup> for Bristol and the West of England</b>	<b>Bristol</b>	<b>Bath and North East Somerset</b>	<b>South Glos</b>	<b>North Somerset</b>
Proportion born outside the UK	18.8%	12.1%	10.6%	8.4%
Proportion who speak a main language other than English	10.1%	4.9%	5.4%	3.9%
Number of people who report to not speak English well or at all	7,147	934	2,108	1,217





People  
involved in  
the research



People with  
lived experience  
of displacement  
and migration



Representing  
21 countries

More than 110 people were involved in our research, of which 66 people have lived experience of displacement and migration, representing at least 21 countries. This builds on our 2023 report which drew on the voices of 49 participants from 17 countries and illustrated the challenges and opportunities for refugee and migrant communities in Bristol. It outlined recommendations to improve the systems to enable these communities to achieve their potential. Two strong themes which emerged from participants' accounts were the importance of good education and English language training for integration and getting the job they want. We also saw how meaningful employment and earning a decent income is an essential element of leading a fulfilling life in Britain. Employment experiences are strongly linked to experiences in other aspects of integration eg physical and mental health, financial security, housing and social relations.<sup>4, 5</sup>

This year, our research focuses on actioning and developing the recommendations to improve training and employment outcomes. We aim to create change by using robust evidence gathered from the voices of lived experience and expert practitioners to shape policies and practices, and to improve training and employment outcomes for refugee and migrant communities.

People from refugee and migrant communities often have worse employment outcomes than locally-born people. For example, people who originally migrated for asylum reasons are less likely to be in work than UK-born people (51% compared to 73%).<sup>6</sup> Migrants and refugees are more likely to be on temporary and zero-hour contracts, shift work and night shifts, or be overqualified for their jobs than UK-born people.<sup>7</sup>

It is widely recognised that there is a need to boost and integrate ESOL, training and employment support in Bristol and the West of England to enable refugee and migrant communities to achieve their aspirations.<sup>8</sup> Improving training and skills to enable disadvantaged and underemployed people to find work and progress to higher level jobs will benefit not just those individuals, but fulfil the economic and skills needs of the region by helping to address skills shortages.<sup>9</sup>

As our research demonstrates, people from refugee and migration backgrounds face a lot of challenges finding a job and progressing in work. For many, the level of their English language skills prevents them from finding work suitable for their qualifications and experience. Census data from 2021 shows that there are 11,406 people in the four local authority areas in the West who report to not speak English well or at all.<sup>10</sup>



There is a range of ESOL provision in Bristol, however many people struggle to access suitable classes due to a lack of available or sufficiently flexible provision, funding eligibility, caring or work commitments, travel and other costs.

In general, the training and skills system in the West of England is highly fragmented.<sup>11</sup> This particularly affects ESOL provision, where no central referral service means that those who need English language training are not always aware of spaces available. Many who are ready to learn face a long wait before accessing classes, and, in Bristol, over 2000 people are on ESOL waiting lists!<sup>12</sup> This fragmented provision can also result in a lack of clear progression pathways. Local ESOL providers have expressed the need for a more coordinated approach to assessment and placement.<sup>13</sup>

However, as participants in our research have said, refugee and migrant communities face many other barriers besides language to accessing meaningful and sustainable employment.<sup>8</sup>

Our research aims to improve training and employment outcomes for people from refugee and migrant communities by shaping improvements in ESOL and skills training, improving routes into work and creating more inclusive and effective employment recruitment practices.

This interim report outlines key priorities for improving training and employment outcomes for refugee and migrant communities. During the launch event for this report we will work with key stakeholders to identify concrete and specific actions needed to address these priorities and create change in these areas.

Our research places the views, experiences and recommendations of people with lived experience at centre stage. We are working collaboratively with refugee and migrant, ESOL, training, careers and employment stakeholders to respond to these to achieve our objectives.





We held focus groups and interviews with 66 people with lived experience of displacement and migration from 21 countries, 7 of these were participants from our 2023 research whom we reconnected with. Participants were invited to discuss their experiences and suggestions regarding the process of being assessed and placed in ESOL class; the challenges and enablers for finding and progressing in work in the UK; and suggestions to improve refugees' and migrants' employment outcomes. Some interviews discussed both these topics, while others focused on one topic as appropriate for that individual and the interview context. Four focus groups discussed ESOL assessment and placement, and three focused on looking for work and being employed. Eight interviews were conducted in Arabic and a number of interviews and focus groups involved informal interpreting. We reimbursed costs and compensated participants for their time.

We also interviewed 13 specialists in ESOL, careers advice and guidance, and recruitment, some of whom have lived experience of displacement or migration. We gathered expert opinions on the benefits, challenges and enablers for improving migrants' and refugees' employment outcomes, and recommendations to improve recruitment, employment and training practices. The specialists discussed important features of an inclusive and effective initial assessment tool, their opinions on a common ESOL assessment process, and gave feedback on an exemplar pilot common initial assessment tool.<sup>14</sup>

Two stakeholder workshops were held to share learnings from the focus groups and interviews, and collaborate to develop them into actions towards creating change. The first workshop focused on shaping ESOL initial assessment in the West of England. Attendees constituted 13 managers and practitioners from ESOL stakeholders in Bristol and the West of England region. We identified opportunities and challenges of a common regional ESOL assessment process and designed an effective and inclusive initial assessment tool. The second workshop focused on improving migrants' and refugees' routes to employment. 18 professionals attended from a range of training, employment, support and other stakeholder organisations in the region. We explored the research findings and shared knowledge, expertise and existing practice. We identified key priorities and agreed on actions to advance the priorities. The following sections present our key interim findings which are drawn from these interviews, focus groups and workshops.







# KEY BARRIERS

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## to sustainable employment for refugees and migrants

- Level of English language ability, including the need to acquire vocational, technical and colloquial language of the workplace.
- Accessing appropriate and effective ESOL provision.
- Experiencing bias and discrimination, and being perceived in terms of language and skills 'deficits'.
- Qualifications and experience gained overseas are often not recognised in the UK.
- Norms and requirements of UK labour market and job application processes.



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# KEY ENABLERS

## to sustainable employment for refugees and migrants

- A single point of contact and referral system for ESOL to facilitate access to appropriate provision.
- Training in sector specific and everyday language of the workplace.
- Support with recognition and accreditation of prior learning and transferring qualifications.
- Training which acknowledges and builds on skills.
- Recruitment practices that support applicants to demonstrate their experience and achievements.

# SHAPING INITIAL ASSESSMENT AND PLACEMENT IN ESOL

Our research confirmed there is a need for ESOL provision that is appropriate, accessible, flexible, local and fits around caring responsibilities and working patterns. Improving the ESOL initial assessment and placement process would help learners find the training they need.

Participating ESOL professionals highlighted how a single, initial assessment interview and then being directed to an appropriate class would lead to faster access to training. It would avoid multiple initial assessments with different providers which can be stressful. Instead of having to navigate, often alone, the currently fragmented ESOL provision in the region, learners could be signposted to suitable courses and referred to additional support or training. This would result in a central waiting list for the region which is fairer to prospective learners. A common assessment process would benefit ESOL providers by addressing long waiting lists and helping other providers fill courses. It could also provide useful data for curriculum planning and improve communication between providers. This would improve efficiency and avoid gaps and duplication in ESOL provision.

ESOL learners and ESOL professionals felt that the process of initial assessment and placement in ESOL classes should include gaining an understanding of more than a person's level of English, and identifying their wider needs such as childcare, financial barriers, disability, or mental and physical well-being. It is also important that the initial assessment process should identify learners' existing skills, qualifications and aspirations and address these in order to support them to achieve their goals. This enables practitioners to refer on to additional training, for example vocational, ICT and maths courses. This also enables teachers to understand and work with the learner as a whole person, and tailor their teaching to build on learners' strengths, rather than viewing them in terms of a skills and language 'deficit'. The research confirms that assessment and placement in ESOL, like all aspects of ESOL provision, needs to be trauma informed.



### Understanding people's wider needs

Teacher should know this person's social life. How is social interact? Is he living somewhere safe with the community? Have community here? Is he lonely? Teacher should ask those things. And they should ask also, this person's health. Is he healthy? Some people, we can see outside is good, or maybe inside is not healthy. And the third thing is that you should ask if that person immigration state, how he's going. Some people, they need help, but they don't have anybody to help them. So teachers should ask all these question. And she should refer who can help this person financially, healthy, immigration, all these thing. The teacher, when they enrol in a course or something, they should ask.

### Personal account from lived experience



### Understanding existing skills and future goals

Everybody's not same, different ages, different life experience, different level of education. So when we came here, they put us all in one basket. So that's not right thing to do... Here, no one ask you, because we cannot speak English. We cannot express what we learn, what we want. So no one give us that chance. When we come here, there was 10 people, they treat us all same -we come from Asia, all Asian are same, ignorant. We come from Africa, all African [laughs], like we are ignorant. But we are not.

[My suggestion] is to take care of those who are experienced, and who are skilful because there are some points which they are lacking now, but they are trying to stand on their own feet and do something in the country and work like any other citizens and pay their taxes and be helpful and everything.

### Personal accounts from lived experience

## Next steps for improving initial assessment & placement in ESOL

It was seen as crucial that all providers agree on the language part of the initial assessment, so they can be confident that the assessment of learners' language level is consistent across all providers and that learners can be referred directly into classes. This was agreed as a priority.

The research has been a catalyst for local ESOL providers to collaborate and trial a new iteration of an assessment tool produced by Community Learning at Bristol City Council. This will just assess learners' language level, allowing providers to conduct assessments of learners' wider needs.

Our research has provided crucial insights into the requirements of ESOL learners and ESOL providers, which will inform and facilitate the use of a common initial assessment tool in the West of England region. It provides strong evidence to support the need for a single point of contact for potential ESOL learners in the region, with a single assessment interview, and one waiting list. This would facilitate faster access to appropriate English language and other training, and enable a more effective and inclusive way of assessing and placing people in ESOL classes, to better support learning and progression.



## IMPROVING EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

Our interim findings clearly demonstrate the benefits of improving employment outcomes for refugee and migrant communities.

These people bring a wealth of talent and transferable skills which provide benefits for employers, economies and communities. Actively supporting these groups into employment would help address skills shortages in sectors such as health, social care and hospitality.



Migrants and refugees often contribute particular assets, such as multilingual skills, which are invaluable in a multicultural country. They often bring resilience, a valuable asset which can increase the strength of a team. Additionally, increasing workforce diversity benefits organisations<sup>15</sup> by bringing a range of experiences, viewpoints and approaches to working and increasing cognitive diversity.<sup>16</sup> A more culturally diverse workforce can improve organisational effectiveness or quality of service as it often better reflects the diversity of customers, clients or patients. Improving the employment outcomes for migrants and refugees helps reduce poverty, deprivation and societal inequalities.

People from migrant and refugee communities face many challenges in trying to find work, achieve their employment aspirations, or find a job commensurate with their existing qualifications and experience.

Level of English language ability is a barrier for many, and we have already demonstrated some of the obstacles to accessing appropriate English language training. However, as participants in our research articulated, refugee and migrant communities face many other barriers to accessing meaningful and sustainable employment besides language.

## CHALLENGING BIAS & DISCRIMINATION

Bias and discrimination can impact refugees' and migrants' employment paths. Recruitment tests can contain cultural bias or accessibility issues. And racism, anti-migrant sentiment or linguistic xenophobia that exists in wider society can influence who is selected for job roles.

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## Discrimination

I was told that I'm so ambitious, you know, I came to this country and I'm not English and I shouldn't be thinking of applying for another job in five years because I can't, I'm not ready to do a PhD. So all of these were comments that she used to make to put me off progressing because in her opinion I wasn't in a position to be ambitious, I was a refugee. Another manager when I was working in a care home as a carer and I was just like, I got my first job, she used to say 'oh don't tell people that you are a refugee, nobody is going to like you and nobody is going to respect you and nobody wants to employ you' ... I had an awful experience.

Personal account from lived experience



An account of a participant in his 40s highlights how age discrimination can be an added barrier for more mature migrants and refugees who must apply for elementary level jobs.

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*Interviewee:* So I am ready for all...all job. The job is problem [laugh] ... and I'm going to his restaurant. The man is looking at me and said 'no, you are old man' ... Not accept me because of my ... The whole people has said 'you old'. [laugh] ... The jobs officer, all people accepted young ... young man like 20, 23, yes 19. It's the experience is also important. As just before I am army. Not another option.

*Researcher:* What would you like to do?

*Interviewee:* [sigh] I like anything. Anything job.

Personal account from lived experience



# TAILORED SUPPORT FOR NAVIGATING THE UK LABOUR MARKET

Increased access is needed to tailored training and IAG which helps with understanding and navigating the norms and cultures of the UK job market. For newcomers, it can take time to settle and adjust to their new life. Poor mental health can be a factor for many, resulting from trauma, experiences of the asylum process, or living in precarious circumstances.

The requirement to promote one's skills and achievements in the UK may vary from requirements in other countries. Many people find the literacy skills and cultural knowledge needed to complete job applications and CVs can be an obstacle.

Therefore, training and career guidance should support digital literacy and access as well as tackling job descriptions, CVs and job applications. A digital or video CV, in which skills can be demonstrated visually, would be beneficial for gaining work in some occupations.

Proper support with interview preparation is needed, including clarifying interview expectations and processes eg SMART interview scoring, STAR interview response technique, support with AI-led recruitment processes, and how to describe and showcase skills and achievements. Additionally, for many jobs, such as in health and social care, candidates are expected to demonstrate particular values.

People seeking asylum are usually barred from work, and this, coupled with restrictions on many other aspects of their life, can have lasting effects on their employment and other integration outcomes once they have refugee status. There needs to be consideration of how to include people seeking asylum in training, advice and guidance provision to improve their future employment outcomes.

## RECOGNISING AND BOOSTING SKILLS AND QUALIFICATIONS

A commonly cited issue was lack of UK qualifications and experience; for many, their overseas qualifications and work experience are not accepted by employers or transferable to the UK context, and many overseas qualifications





have a lower equivalence in the UK. Being forced to leave qualification certificates and other credentials is a common part of the experience of being a displaced person. Similarly, many migrants and refugees are unable to supply references or the required information for DBS checks. Requalifying is often costly and can take several years and language competence presents a further barrier to this. Financial constraints and the structure of the benefits system results can push people to take any job but then they become trapped and unable to retrain for a job matching their levels of skills and qualifications.

Our findings highlight that, to help people find work and achieve their potential, there is a need for a process which aids recognition and accreditation of refugees' and migrants' prior learning and existing skills. This would encourage recognition of refugees and migrants as individuals with strengths and talent to offer, and challenge perceptions of skills 'deficits' of these groups. There are existing models of skills verification or competence mapping used overseas. For example, a scheme in Germany,<sup>18</sup> created by the public employment service, involves online tests with videos and questions. Such a scheme calls for collaboration between government / local authority bodies, training providers, advice and guidance professionals, job coaches and employers.



### **The need for recognition of prior learning**


*Researcher:* Is [working in a similar role to before] something you'd like to do in the future?

*Interviewee:* Maybe, maybe, maybe. I feel it's too late now and this is one of the things, we feel like it's too late for us to start from the beginning, most of us, when we come here, like old ... Some of us, we feel like it is waste of time to get a qualification from the beginning and start the same thing again and again, so they just go to these kind of jobs which doesn't allow, doesn't require a qualification like they have.

**Personal account from lived experience**








Our findings emphasise the need to boost ‘ESOL for Work’ and ‘Vocational ESOL’ courses. Some training providers already run these courses, but provision needs to be expanded, and stronger collaboration with employers would enable more tailoring of curriculum design to sector-specific language, as well as general workplace language needs. This could include tailored support with navigating the UK labour market, job applications and interviews.

Providing work experience for people who do not possess recognised qualifications or UK work experience is another vital element of improving employment outcomes. This would help people from migration backgrounds to gain confidence, experience and showcase their skills. Some participants wished to be able to demonstrate their practical skills as part of the job application process, for example in a work trial.



### **The need for work experience or a work trial**

Maybe people assume... how they know about me if you don't give me that chance? If you give me that chance, [you will see] 'oh, she can do that'. Just if you are thinking 'oh maybe she can't do that', even if you've not tried, maybe you've not given me a chance. That's my big issue, yeah, my problem is confidence, really yeah ... Give them a chance ... For example, if that person in the interview, 'okay, if you do this I try one week or two week and two or three days, can you show me your skills? And can you try? If I'm happy you can carry on, if not, oh, maybe you cannot do more' ... They do not give you a chance.



### **Personal account from lived experience**

Work placements could form part of the curriculum of Vocational ESOL and general ESOL courses, potentially boosting the effectiveness and success rates of these courses. Training providers could partner with employers to arrange work experience. Creative ways of funding work placements should be explored, for example, whether it could form part of accreditation to meet existing skills funding requirements.

North Somerset Council has recently created a role dedicated to engaging employers to identify opportunities for refugees.

Caafi Health has supported refugee medics and health professionals by connecting them to local hospitals and creating work experience.

City of Bristol College has been involving employers with shaping the curriculum of their vocational courses, so that learners can acquire the language and skills they need to move more rapidly into employment.

ACH provides work experience for learners on its courses by engaging them in volunteering roles which include access to an accredited course to increase leadership and work-based knowledge.

**Our research is revealing many more examples of good practice and these will be showcased in our final report.**

Costs were highlighted as a barrier, with calls for increased funding to help employers and incentivise a wider range of businesses and organisations to engage with these courses. Another barrier to work experience can be the paperwork and regulations which employers may have to comply with. Working with local and regional authorities is essential for creating pathways to overcoming these barriers.



# INCLUSIVE RECRUITMENT PRACTICES

In tandem with these measures, the research emphasised the need for employers to adapt and diversify their recruitment practices to ensure they reach migrants and refugees who have the skills employers need. Employers need to understand the communities they are based in, and provide outreach and engagement activities, for example workshops and job fairs. To increase inclusivity, employers should evaluate job adverts and descriptions to remove unnecessary jargon, consider the number of essential and desirable criteria, and whether the levels of English or qualifications specified are necessary for the role. Providing advance notice of interview questions and interview scoring techniques would also help level the playing field, as would providing clear feedback after the interview.



Some employers are reluctant to employ refugees and migrants due to uncertainty around immigration law, or preconceptions of migrants in general. Training in unconscious bias, cultural awareness and relevant immigration law, and electing organisational EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) champions who sit on interview panels would improve inclusive and effective recruitment practices. To enable people from migration backgrounds to achieve their potential, employers need to support career progression by recording employees' skills and achievements and providing training and constructive feedback. The option to work part-time or flexible hours would enable some refugees and migrants to continue their ESOL or other training, as well as meet any caring commitments.



# PRIORITIES & COMMITMENTS

**Our priorities and commitments for improving employment outcomes. How can we develop and strengthen these?**

A variety of measures have been outlined in the findings, however, the research identified 6 key priorities to take forward in 2024 and beyond. These are summarised here along with actions agreed at the workshops. We need your input on these.

**1.** A common ESOL initial assessment process for the West of England. This would enable potential learners to be signposted and referred directly into suitable, available courses. The research has been a catalyst for ESOL providers to collaborate and trial a common initial assessment tool, produced by Community Learning at Bristol City Council. *What are the implications of a common initial assessment process for your organisation, or ESOL stakeholders you work with?*

**2.** Boost provision of Vocational ESOL courses and ESOL for Work courses. Increase the number of these courses, and improve their effectiveness by partnering with employers, and including work placements. Support professionals committed to work towards increasing the number of employment and ESOL courses in their organisations, and work with employers on this. There were also commitments to amend current course content to reflect the findings of this research, increase the provision of IAG to learners, and strengthen referrals from ESOL classes to employment support provision. *What else is needed to make these courses successful?*

**3.** Provide work experience opportunities for migrants and refugees. This could be incorporated into general ESOL as well as vocational courses. Training providers committed to offer 'in house' work experience to their ESOL learners, in suitable job roles in their organisations, providing opportunity for valuable workplace experience and references. *What are the barriers to implementing this more widely?*



4. A scheme for recognition and accreditation of prior learning, competence mapping, and skills verification. This would be recognised by participating education providers and employers and would be done by developing an online platform with digital tools. This could be initiated at local level and be scaled up to the regional level. *Are there similar approaches that you are aware of that could inform this?*

5. Inclusive recruitment practices. Employers should adapt and diversify their recruitment and retention practices to ensure they attract and recruit migrants and refugees who have the skills for the job. *Can you share examples of good practice that can be replicated?*

6. Integrated collaboration between employment, training and support stakeholders. This is an overarching priority which could form a strong foundation to facilitate the above priorities. To improve training and employment outcomes for refugees and migrants, we need stronger collaboration between employers and ESOL and training providers, refugee support organisations, advice and guidance professionals, work coaches, the DWP and local and regional authorities. There is a need to strengthen existing partnerships and bring these together to collaborate between all the key stakeholder organisations, for example through the creation of a central hub.

Training and careers support organisations committed to stronger partnership working with employers, to help identify employers who can offer work experience and to create more employment opportunities for refugee and migrant communities.

Collaboration between stakeholders would aid the strengthening and replicating of existing good practice in training and employing people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. *What does effective collaboration look like?*





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