

About me

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Firstly, I would like to express my gratitude at being given the opportunity to share some of my experiences and reflections as part of this consultation.

I have been a senior lecturer in ESOL teacher education at the University of South Wales since 2008 and have worked as a volunteer with the Welsh Refugee Council since 2013. I advise on the design and implementation of the suite of ESOL provision that is currently delivered at their offices in Cardiff. With regards to refugees on the SVPRS, I have been working closely with officials from Rhondda Cynon Taff to plan and organise a syllabus of ESOL provision for the six resettled families who began arriving in May 2016. In these capacities, I have met and taught hundreds of refugees and asylum seekers in Wales over the last three years and have observed first-hand the challenges and difficulties they face. Given the above, the suggestions that follow will focus on areas of the action plan that relate to my area of expertise, namely, Higher Education and ESOL provision.

1. The pace and effectiveness of the Welsh Government approach to resettling refugees through the UK Government's Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (SVPRS)

ESOL Provision

Having worked closely with refugees and asylum seekers who have arrived in Wales through various, often unconventional means, as well as with families on the SVPRS, it is clear that there is now a very obvious "two tier" system in operation. The thorough and detailed responses made by the Welsh Refugee Council and the Welsh Refugee Coalition draw attention to the many outstanding aspects of good integration practice that are features of the SVPRS yet also highlight the risks and drawbacks of limiting the provision, of such a comprehensive resettlement package, to an exclusive cohort of migrants.

As stated in many other responses to this consultation, developing competency in English is crucial to effective integration. Yet despite the "gold standard" support that is provided to those on the SVPRS, there is still alarmingly inadequate ESOL provision in place across Wales. This is a serious drawback. The recent UK government-commissioned review on social integration concluded that language was fundamental to integration of immigrant communities and that further funding should be made available to ESOL (Casey 2016). From the reports included here (e.g. see responses from Swansea and Torfaen) it is obvious that local authorities are struggling to provide full-time ESOL

courses for the resettled Syrians. One of the most frequently recurring requests from the families is their desire to attend far more English classes than at present. FE colleges are often oversubscribed, are unable to place the refugees in a class suitable to their linguistic need or do not provide any provision at all at the level which the families need. The result is, in every case that I have encountered, a patchy ad-hoc provision that relies largely on volunteer teachers. For example, in RCT, ESOL provision for the first four months of the families' arrival was delivered entirely by volunteer language teachers.

Recommendations

- WAG should encourage cooperation between local authorities and FE colleges to ensure that newly arrived refugees are placed in appropriate level classes as soon as possible.
- Few areas in Wales have FE colleges that provide full time ESOL classes at a complete range of learner levels. In these cases, authorities should be provided with guidelines regarding effective ESOL provision. Such guidelines should include information about examinations and qualifications that may be offered as well as advice on teacher qualifications, recommended number of hours of study and so on.
- WAG should ensure that funding be made available in order for the above to be attainable.

2. The effectiveness of the Refugee and Asylum Seeker Delivery Plan

Higher Education

The action plan states that it is a priority to “increase opportunities for asylum seekers to access higher education” (p.16). Working in both the HE and voluntary ESOL sectors, I understand the difficulties and complexities involved in this aim. Nevertheless, there are a number of practical opportunities that should be considered:

Recommendations

- As detailed in the Welsh Refugee Council response (p.7), asylum seekers are still treated as international students and thus are prevented from attending university due to the financial burden. WAG should explore possibility of allowing asylum seekers to be treated as home students – as are those with refugee status.
- Refugees are treated as home students but do not get funding for International Foundation programmes. This is a serious impediment to a large number of refugees and asylum seekers. This is because many refugees possess the academic requirements for entry into university but lack the linguistic requirement. WAG should investigate the possibility of working with universities in order to allow refugees and asylum seekers entry on to International Foundation Programmes and bridging language programmes, where successful completion would be the condition to university entry, without expecting them to pay exorbitant international fees.

ESOL

There is widespread agreement that the development of language competency is key to successful integration, nevertheless, as stated in many responses (e.g. see The Welsh Refugee Coalition report p.7), ESOL provision varies greatly across Wales. A pattern that appears to be replicated in all areas is firstly, the existence of long waiting lists to attend formal, accredited classes delivered at colleges and secondly, a reliance on volunteer organisations to provide survival “drop-in” classes. The action plan states that it is a priority to “improve the flexibility of ESOL provision” (p.16) and to that end, the following recommendations are made:

Recommendations

- In order to prevent refugees and asylum seekers having to wait up to twelve months to access language classes, providers of accredited language courses (e.g. FE colleges) should be supported in increasing the number of entry points throughout the year.
- Organisations delivering drop-in provision should be supported e.g. through funding being made available to increase the sparse provision that is currently offered. Moreover, third-sector organisations could be supported in developing closer cooperation. For example, in working together to assess new arrivals’ competency levels and offer bespoke classes with an integrated timetable. In this way, migrants could attend classes in more than one institution and voluntary organisations may work together to offer a greater total number of language classes.
- WAG should encourage closer collaboration between drop-in centres and formal providers in order to facilitate process of enrolment / transition from one centre to another e.g. through workshop visits offering access information etc.
- Access to language classes for women with young children is limited. Organisations such as WRC and Oasis have valuable experience and are trusted by the migrant community. They should be given support to deliver language classes for this vulnerable section of the migrant community.

Conclusion

The SVPRS contains much to commend it with regard to its wide-ranging attempt to provide an effective integration package. Many lessons can be learned from these initial attempts at coordinated integration. As stated in other reports, there are many examples of good practice that should be extended to the way all migrants are treated. However, the ESOL element of the programme is patchy, incomplete and desperately needs support in order that effective, rather emergency, language classes are delivered.

Much can, and should, be done with regards to increasing opportunities for accessing higher education. Granting migrants access to the many language foundation courses offered at Welsh Universities would not be difficult yet would make an enormous difference to the integration of many refugees and their ability to contribute to society.

In order to achieve WAG’s aim of more flexible ESOL provision, organisations offering English language classes need to receive support. It is crucial that the number of entry points to formal, full-time courses are expanded (e.g. to three points during the year rather than one). In addition, organisations offering the essential drop-in classes, delivered by qualified, experienced instructors, need to be supported in their aim to deliver a more comprehensive suite of language classes.

