

## Is access to the labour market a pull factor for asylum seekers?

### Background

The Immigration Bill will shortly be debated in the House of Commons. One of the amendments which was passed at the Committee Stage in the Lords was that asylum seekers will be permitted to take up employment if they have been waiting for 6 months or more for a decision on their application for asylum. Currently, asylum seekers must wait 12 months before they can apply for the right to work, and if granted they are then restricted to jobs on the 'Shortage Occupations List'. This list is extremely restrictive (example jobs are 'international ballerina' and 'nuclear machine technologist in the aerospace sector') and so the shortage occupation list rule effectively bans most asylum seekers from working in the UK.

The work ban was brought in in 2002 and for the past year researchers at the University of Sheffield have been analysing the political debate on this policy. We have found that one single justification has dominated discussion on this policy every time that opening up access to the labour market to asylum seekers has been debated in the Commons, the Lords, and in the media. Ministers in the government in power and Home Office spokespeople have repeatedly, for 13 years, given the same reason: if asylum seekers are given the right to work, more asylum seekers will choose the UK as a destination country.

### Work as a pull factor for asylum seekers –what does the evidence say?

At the University of Sheffield we have undertaken a systematic review of research undertaken since 1997 looking at the factors determining asylum destination country. Eleven of these studies are qualitative (they involve interviewing asylum seekers) and eighteen of these studies are quantitative (they use large scale datasets of country of origin and destination), and one uses both statistical and interview data. Some of the statistical studies are global, some are Europe wide and some look just at the UK.

The review has found that:

- ***Not one research study has found a long term correlation between labour market access and destination choice***
- ***The most up to date research concludes that access to work has little, if any, effect on variations in asylum applications***

### **Do countries which allow asylum seekers to access the labour market attract more asylum applicants?**

No. We have ranked European countries according to labour market access for asylum seekers and then compared the number of asylum applications received for each country. There is no clear correlation between labour market access and numbers of asylum applications. **Why?** Because many complex factors are involved in the migration journeys of asylum seekers, they do not have perfect access to all information, and their choices are not made solely on the basis of economic benefit. Because of this complexity it is extremely difficult for researchers to identify a single variable which acts as the primary 'pull'.

However, within a constrained set of options the main pull factors for asylum seekers to the UK, according to the available data, are:

1. The presence of family and friends in destination country (they want to be near familiar people)
2. The language spoken in the destination country (privileging countries with a familiar language)
3. A belief that the destination country respects human rights and the rule of law *in general*
4. Colonial ties between country of origin and destination –which is clearly related to the first 3 pull factors

### **Does labour market access for *asylum seekers* encourage *economic migrants* to apply for asylum?**

This is unlikely. There is no research explicitly focusing on so called 'bogus' asylum seekers. However, the statistical research discussed above, which finds no long term correlation between labour market access and numbers of applications, looks at total numbers of asylum applications and does therefore capture the full range of types of applicants. It is the availability of work which attracts low skilled economic migrants and, in the absence of a visa, it is easier to stay hidden illegally than to apply for asylum and become visible to the authorities. Asylum seekers in the UK are finger printed, issued with a biometric ID card, required to present at a reporting centre on a weekly basis, and are liable to detention. Applicants with little legitimate claim for asylum are more liable to be detained and their chance of deportation is greatly increased. Applying for asylum would therefore put such individual's migration-for-work project in grave jeopardy.

### **Policy Recommendations**

On the basis of available evidence we conclude that opening up access to the labour market in line with the minimum standards contained in the EU reception conditions directive is unlikely to have any impact upon the number of asylum applications received by the UK.

***We recommend that asylum seekers be granted unrestricted access to the labour market if they have been waiting for 6 months or more for a decision on their application for asylum.***

An extended version of this briefing, which includes references to all of the studies reviewed, can be found at:  
[asylumwelfarework.com](http://asylumwelfarework.com)

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