

“I graduated in Engineering and was a telecommunications engineer for the 17 years, rising to become Chief Engineer of Post and Communication. I then entered politics and served as an MP for 5 years, during which time I gained a Diploma in Political Science. I served as Deputy Minister of Transport & Communications and Chairman of the Public Appointments Committee of the Institute of Education. In 2007 I had to leave suddenly and there was no time to even think about collecting my Degree certificates or other proof of my profession. I cannot prove my qualifications. I can't access University to gain a new one. I want to say “test me out, give me a go, let me show what I can do” then you will know if I am really an engineer or not. So I have tried to build a portfolio of British qualifications through accessing several further education courses. On the suggestion of the college, I worked for a Certificate in Adult Numeracy Level 1. It can be humiliating. I don't know how many qualifications in how many subjects I will have by the time I get a decision, but I doubt whether any of them will enable me to be a telecommunications engineer again”

“I was a Retail Manager as well as also a Retail Store Manager at one of the biggest stores in Zimbabwe, equivalent to Marks and Spencer. In UK I tried to get into employment relating to these skills but it was so hard to get into the retail industry in here. I ended up managing to work for the royal mail and then I managed to work for New Look, but just as the hanger boy based in the stock room, hanging up clothes and putting up the texts for the promotions. It was so frustrating I ended up giving up. This experience motivated me to start the Skilled project”

“Being a scientist was something I set myself from 12 years old. I was asking questions about life. So I studied chemistry and biology to understand the phenomenon of life. I got my degree and my idea was to become a doctor of research in science, but I couldn't because in 2004 I had to flee from my country. My degree isn't accepted here. I would have to start undergraduate chemistry all over again. So I started a degree in CISCO networking, but then my support stopped and I couldn't continue. I just got my status last month, and can now finish my studies. Some people have already finished the course, but they haven't been able to find a job in networking. It's not easy for black people. People in the north don't seem to be used to having black people in higher positions. After 3 months the job centre forced them to take any jobs, and are now in factories or cleaning. So I am a bit discouraged about gaining high level qualifications. Personally I won't be able to work on the factory line. I like living in the north east, but I have given myself one year to try to find a job as qualified Cisco engineer, otherwise i will have to leave and go to a bigger more cosmopolitan city. From my own community, for every 200 people getting the right to remain, 150 will move from the North East to London or Manchester because they can't find the kind of job they are looking for, to match their qualifications. I don't know how we can make people aware of what is going on. But at the end of the day there won't be many black people left in the North East. They will just go to cities that are already overpopulated”

“I got my status after 3 months in UK. So for over 1 year I have been looking for a job. I graduated in India with BA in Economics and masters degrees in Management. I intended to go back to my homeland to help Africans as well as my own people. Even though I have these qualifications I can't get any job. I have studied the A4E internet and use the computer at the job centre, been to work agencies, and applied to many companies. They call me for interview and their main question is always *“Do you have any work experience in the UK?”*. I don't have work experience here, but I do have work experience in my homeland. I am totally frustrated by this. One day I requested a job for cleaning and they requested *“do you have work experience for cleaning?”*. How do you develop your work experience? This problem is affecting a lot of people. I know I'm going to deteriorate instead of develop. I hate to sign at Job Centre Plus every two weeks, because I have the ability to work but life is pressurising me to go there. I don't feel comfortable to speak with them, they don't have any good reaction with me also. There is a lot of very educated and talented people here and they may contribute something to this country. But they can't get a good opportunity. People in human resources development should understand this complicated problem with refugees. I would organize work placements or shadow working in specific areas. Then one can get a reference, and create new channels. This is a good opportunity”

“I used to be a professional microbiologist in the medical laboratory in Iran, for 8 years. Now I am staff manager at an Iranian restaurant, which is not related to my previous skills or experience. At the time I came here I had a little child. I am not sure what will happen in the future regarding my indefinite leave to remain. This has been a very stressful time for me. I am studying English to improve my language, and it has made it difficult to focus on learning. I'm also studying health and social care in the college. I was lucky to get into this course. I'm hoping to go to university to become a Nurse in the future. I believe if I had got good support and advice to direct me to my own profession, it would take a very short time and I would have been able to continue sooner and further through the skills I had from back home”

“I studied for 3 years to be a medical assistant. I trained at the hospital to help the doctor treat minor injuries, working like a nurse to give practical assistance and information, and by giving lectures. I wanted to have work so I could afford a nice house. It was very good work as in the morning I worked as a medical assistant or a pharmacy assistant, and in the afternoon I could open my own small business, a small pharmacy shop. Then I had to leave and come to England. I don't think the job agency will find a job for me. We know that they don't do anything. The colleges here don't have courses related to medical assistant, or dispensary or pharmacy assistant courses, just nursing and it is really difficult because you have to write a lot and my English is not good. Or you have to be in a job already, like Boots, and they will train their staff, but you have to be in the job already”

“I got involved in music 25 years ago and have played with big artists such as Papa Wemba, Koffi Olomide, and Kanda Bongo Man. I have degrees in Jazz, Classical and Vocal Harmony and Music Arrangement. When I had to come to the UK, I wanted to try to teach music, but language was a barrier, I couldn't produce my diplomas, I didn't bring them with me when I fled, and I wasn't allowed to work. When I got my status, I decided to try again but they asked me again for proof of my diplomas. So now I am studying Music Technology and will graduate in 2011. I may be able to teach this way. Music can take away the depression and all the stress people are going through and it brings people together, in harmony. It can keep young people off the streets and give them skills and self esteem. I think we need to give the musicians and artists a chance to develop and use their skills. Art is the most effective way of putting people together, in harmony. Professional artists should be able to make a living from it, but we have less chance to perform as we can't afford the venues and equipment. I find it strange that the big arts organizations are not really helping in terms of publicity and getting the refugee community involved. We need the help of proper people and the guidance from them. In the job centre they don't consider the skills you bring to them. They are prepared to give you what they have in the schedule. I'm a musician. The only thing I can do is music. It's what I love”

“When I was a child, I had a dream to finish school and work to help my family and my children. I studied accountancy 3 years and was an assistant accountant in my country. I have to find a course related to accountancy because I am still doing ESOL. I don't know anywhere to go except job centres, but I don't think they can do much about it. They have some staff who are not helpful, they are not respectful towards what we ask. I hear a lot of other people say when they apply for a job or they ask help to find them a job, they didn't do that. That's why I think they can't do anything for me as well. They just tell you *“there are two computers there. Go and find for a job over there”*. I can't do that. I don't know where else to go”

“For 15 years I was a tailor, and thousands of customers came to my shop in my house. I used to sew dresses for school, for people going to Hajj, for weddings, funerals, everything. I was earning quite good money and went to visit Jordan and Iran with the money I earned from sewing. I made everything for myself, for my mum, for my daughters, for my sisters, and I didn't take money from very poor people. Sometimes I did sewing voluntarily for the school so that the children had uniforms. Now I don't have work and I'm staying at home. It is difficult to do this business in Newcastle. There aren't so many Kurdish people around, or with money, and because of my language I can't explain to English people about the measurements, or which styles they want, so I can't do it, or work for someone else. I can't go out to work and leave my children from morning to evening. If I had a shop in my house then people could come and see, and I could meet other people. Because of the language I can't read a lot of information and I can't search to find a job”

"I used to work in Iran as an accountant for 7 years. I've been in the UK for nearly 7 years, and I'm allowed to work here. But I haven't been able to work as an accountant in the UK as they require UK work experience. I tried to find any voluntary opportunity because I need work experience here, tho I have 7 years experience in my country. But I couldn't find any. Nobody accepted me here as an accountant with my experience and all the certificates I have brought from my country. Nobody gave me any advice on how can I find an accounting job. It would be good if I could have the good advice from the beginning to know which direction I have to take in my life"

"I have done diploma in nursing and I used to work in the proper hospital in India. For seven and half years I was a dental nurse. I used to be really busy, starting at 8 o'clock until 5 o'clock and do everything. I wanted to do well in my life and I wish I could do well. If we do well in the life the children's future will be bright. I have worked in India and my qualifications are recognised but every now and then you have to update, and working in the UK it's totally different. You know it's a long time now – 4 years - I have to advance. We tried a lot of (*voluntary*) jobs, but every time we try the issue is "do you have any work reference and any knowledge of working in UK?"

"I qualified in teaching and taught History for 8 years in a major secondary school before having to come to the UK. I taught European history, including Britain from 1750 to the present. When I arrived here I realized that I would have to re-train again for another year or so. This after spending 6 years studying, 4 years of a first degree and a 2 years post graduate teaching qualification. All my studies where done in English. Our system followed the British one. However, the NARIC comparability scheme reduced my qualifications to NVQ 3, which is equivalent to A – levels, besides the fact that I already had done A- levels with Cambridge University External Board before going into tertiary Education. This actually forced me to switch from teaching, an area that I know I was very good at. Seeing the teaching situation here I realized the classroom wasn't quite welcoming for people who are different "

"I was a lecturer at University in Baghdad. I have an MA in methods of teaching English as a foreign language, and I have a BA in English and Literature, and a diploma in engineering. I had a private institute in Baghdad to teach women sewing and arranging flowers. I have these skills yet here I still can't find a job. I worked for 30 years in Iraq. I am used to working. I am not used to being without a job. Because without a job and without education, people aren't in life. That's my belief. If you work you feel you are in life. If you don't work its like being a dead person, without hope, without aims, without anything. I try to restart my life but the problem of work it makes me depressed. I am upset. Like I live endlessly without hope."

"Before I was an Asylum Seeker, but now I am a Refugee everything has changed. Since I started working I say to myself it's a big change. When you are on benefits your life is really limited. Now I am on a salary and it's a big relief. It's really helped me physically and mentally to think about the future, because without a job you can't think about that. I feel like I'm part of Middlesbrough now. I'm thinking about settling down and having a family. Before I was thinking about having to move down south. But now I am a Middlesbrough man! I like what I'm doing. Now I give advice to new status refugees. It's hard for someone who hasn't been through this process to understand what we need to know, and how to get into the system. I like giving back something and helping those coming after us, so that they don't have to go through what we went through. I feel lucky because I see others here who have been waiting 5 or 10 years, and they have kids to raise too. I think about them and thank God for what I have"

"I was a businessman for 5 years, and then went back to my village in Darfur and worked as a teacher in my local school for 3 years until I was forced to leave the country. Teaching is lovely, I enjoyed it. I love working with children, they have creative minds. Every day you feel your mind has beautiful things. When I registered in college here the first thing they asked me what I want to be. I said I want to be a teacher. But still I am struggling to find my way here. First I need to learn English very well and when I am good in English then I can chose what is possible for me. To be able to communicate with other people you need to learn their language. But as asylum seeker it's difficult to study continuously, you don't have peace of mind to concentrate. There is a lot of pressure. I stopped studying for a while"

"When I was young I had an ambition to be a psychologist and to help the war affected or the victims, to help relieve them from psychological distress. After my graduation in economics and accounting in 200, I was assigned to the National Commission for Demobilisation and Integration Programme. I worked for 6 years as a regional project manager to demobilise soldiers, to integrate them economically and socially, and to liaise with all the governmental ministries, private NGO's and other organisations which have volunteered help. I gave advice on economic re-integration to demobilised soldiers and connected them with micro-credit organisations and vocational training. I was also working part-time as an accountant. All the experience was in my country, but here in UK I'm a newcomer. I hope I can work with my profession so that I can contribute to the country and to myself and career as well. If I work I am contributing to the world, to the nation in which I am living and to the company especially in which I will be employed. And then I will build myself also and enhance my capacity or my skills and then my efficiency will grow and my contribution as well will be great. I heard here that people don't work and wait for benefits to come from the government. I don't think its effective for the country and for the individuals, because that would harm them psychologically as well as physically, because they will sit the whole time and then wait for benefit to come, but they are not contributing to the world, to the country, as well as themselves. That means it is paralysing them and also it won't help the society they are living in"

"I have degree in Industrial Relations and Personnel Management. I worked as a Customer Relations Officer and did courses in marketing and entrepreneurship. Then I was employed as General Manager of a retail outlet, managing various departments. If I'd been able to stay in my country I would maybe I would be a director of my own company now. I would like to continue my career in management. But while I've been here I have not been able to use these skills and experience, as I am not allowed to work. When I got to the UK I didn't know a lot of things. I went to the college to see what I could do. I enrolled for ECDL level 1 or 2. I wanted to do levels 4 or 5 but they didn't recognize my certificate so I had to start from scratch. It feels like when they see a black person they think you can't measure up. You have to prove yourself again and again. They see asylum seekers as second class citizens. Then luckily I met someone who advised me my country's degree certificates would be recognized here, and that I could apply to Teesside University. I think they contacted my country to check up on my qualifications. So now I have just been admitted to do a Masters in Management. I pray I can apply my skills here, but from the testimony I've heard from others I am nervous. They have found it difficult to settle down and find jobs that match their skills. They have all been cleaning jobs and warehouse jobs, which is lower than their skills and what they can give the community. I'm hoping and praying when it gets to my time things will have changed"

"I worked in the mining industry for 27 years and was made Underground Manager in charge of all underground operations at the mine. I was responsible for the training and development of mining staff, mentoring graduates, promoting health and safety at the mine and conducting training courses for staff. When I left, I was right at the top, rising to become General Manager. When I arrived here, I was an asylum seeker for five years and during my days an asylum seeker I was never granted permission to work"

"I was a primary school teacher for about for one year before I left because of the political situation in Iraq. I am really happy to live in Newcastle. In Iraq I studied for two years to become a primary school teacher, as you need the education in order to teach. I really enjoyed it, really. I was with the little ones, seeing them grow and gain knowledge. When you come over here the first thing is the language. You cannot become primary school teacher because of the language. That is why I go for ESOL and college to learn English. The second thing is because of the stress when we come over here, we apply for asylum – it is not possible to go out for a job. The third thing is you need more and more years, they give you three years and after that they give you limited leave – you know you need to wait more time and more years"

"I studied 5 years at University to be a vet, and it was the best part of my life. I started work as soon as I finished my studies, and practiced for 11 years, becoming the CEO. It was very rewarding. When I had to claim asylum here in 1992, I only had 50 words of English. I was lucky enough to volunteer at a local veterinary group close to where we lived. I went twice a week just to look at how vets do their job in this country and to make sure I stayed in my area of expertise. It helped me really to understand the ways they operate here. Then I bought some books to prepare myself for the Veterinary exam and oral exam. I tried that back in 1998, 6 years after I came here but I failed because it was really tough and I didn't study well enough. I couldn't afford to dedicate my whole time to do study because at the time I was working as an interpreter and case worker, as I to feed my family. Also, when you learn everyday language, it's very different from specialist or professional language that vets have to use. You need perfect vocabulary to write the exam and pass the oral. And whilst I was studying the war back home was still going on and I found myself looking at one page of the book over and over again, not concentrating on the book but thinking about *"What is happening back home? where is my family? where are my friends?"*. I still sometimes dream about working as a vet because I do miss my profession and I will be over the moon to start to do it again, if I can"

"When I was 13 or 14 I really wanted to write stories. In Iran parents like their children to go to university and be an engineer or midwife. They love that as you have a nice future. But it wasn't my interest. I was thinking I can't do it. I really like the arts. So we had a lot of arguments and then eventually my dad was Ok so I went to university and graduated in Persian literature. I was really mad about writing, so I applied to newspapers and magazines and got a job as a proof reader. Then 9 years ago I started to write reports. My editor said "I had a skill" and gave me the opportunity to go to college. So I worked as a journalist, writing about peoples' life, human rights, women's rights. I really loved that and I really miss my job. But all the time they were closing the newspapers, removing them all the time. Lots of my colleagues had to move to other countries. My really close friend, he was the best photo journalist in Iran, he was arrested and sent to prison. Lots of them had to go. Here when I read a newspaper it's the same structure, but I don't have any confidence about language. It's totally different writing stuff in your own language. I really would like to try, to show what I can do, but I don't know how and need someone to help me, to support me. Now all my ambitions are to continue as a photo journalist, to do documentary stuff. I've started to study photography at college".

"I am from a huge mining area of Congo. I expected to have a long career in mining after gaining my degree in Industrial Chemistry. But I had to leave my country and come to the UK. Whilst I was waiting for a decision on my asylum claim, I was not allowed to work. I could not keep up my work in industrial chemistry, and lost contact with the field. Then I lost confidence that I could continue a career in it. So, as I had some chance to study whilst waiting for my decision, I decided I must start all over again, and train for a career in the growing field of IT"

“When I was a teenager I wanted to be an engineer, like my father. I studied hard. Since I remember I have had a book in my hand. I think studying is part of my body. All my friends and families of my age were going to parties, but I always stayed at home to study because I was looking for a bright future. Finally I was accepted at one of the best universities in Iran to do civil engineering. My father was so pleased with me. At university I tried really hard. I was one of the best students on my course. After that we set up a family business, with my father and my brother. As designers we had to pay careful attention to how a building is constructed, as Iran is located in an earthquake zone. When I came here I said to myself working in a pizza shop is not for you, but after a year I said, no you may have to. It would mean a lot to me if I could start working in an engineering office here, to live the life I used to live. Looking at my life now, its torture. But I tried”

“I am an artist. I have a diploma in sculpture and two certificates in ceramics, one is from Japan. The reason I can't work as an artist here is that I am an asylum seeker and not allowed to work, I can't make plans for my life. Please give me permission to work so that I can plan my life”

“My ambition was to be a soldier, which I became and I reached the high rank. It was good for me because my grandfather and my father were soldiers, so that is how I saw my life forever. I qualified in engineering and mechanics in the army, and being an officer I was given a workshop to lead and was promoted to different departments. I liked it there because I knew how to deal with cars. But I can't use my skills here because they don't do mechanics, they just remove the old part and buy a new part to replace it. So they are not actually repairing anything. I would like to set up a garage but I don't have the money to pay for rent and I can't pay the bank loan interest rates to buy equipment. I prefer to retrain, because the more I sit without using those skills the more I lose them. I don't know any training around here. I was a disciplined man. Life in the army is not about sitting down doing nothing. I am used to physical jobs, it was good exercise. Over a long period of time without doing anything your body just grows big, and in the end I'm just going to get a beard and become an old man. Recently I talked about joining the British Army and doing a refresher course, but if they make me jump, jump, I'm done! I wish I could do that, they can train me and put me somewhere to serve as an IT officer there, that's how I will be able to work”.

“When I arrived in the UK, my first responsibility was to find a way to support myself and my son. And I had to learn English. I asked some pharmacies if I could work for them voluntarily, just to keep in touch and get some experience and references in the UK, but no one accepted me. I couldn’t afford the University. Then I realized I would have to wait for my status, before I could qualify for a student loan. I realized it would take too long (6 years) and cost too much to pursue a career in pharmacy, so I had to start again in another direction”

“I studied mining geology in my home country and soon after graduation I was offered a position to work in the chemistry lab of the University, to help fresh students, for six months. I then secured a job with the Ministry of Mines and Energy for a year and half. Since my arrival in the UK, I have made several attempts to continue studying geology at a higher level, with no success. The length of time - over 9 years not allowed to work - without practicing as a geologist, means it would make it very difficult for me to restart considering my career, in the field I loved. I studied computing (software development) at Teesside University, as this was the only course available to me to take up on part time basis, because of my immigration status”

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“I was an Immigration officer, so when I got my status and started looking for a job I wanted to continue with my career. I was expecting someone to advise me what to do next, because I haven’t got experience in the UK and I don’t know where to begin. So I went to the job centre to look forward to that job. They found me a job as a sales assistant, but when I rang them to make an appointment for interview; they didn’t give a date they just told me to come as soon as possible. I have 3 children and need childcare, so I couldn’t go for 2 days and when I rang again they said they had filled all the places. I was very disappointed. I was really, really looking forward to a job because I can say I am a job-a-holic. I love to work. I really want to work as an immigration officer because I have the advantage of speaking three different local languages from my own country, including English, so I can even be there to interpret. I have confidence in myself because I like to work and I like to associate with people, but I don’t know where to begin my process. I have no help. I need direction and I haven’t got any UK experience so I am looking forward to someone to tell me where to start because I really want to add to the economy and pay tax like any other people – not to be here receiving benefits and sleeping. That’s not my idea. I need to work so that I can help myself and my family, because I am a young mum and I am physically fit and mentally I really want to work”.

“I always wanted to be something, in a good position. I studied for 4 years at University and have a degree in accounting. I worked for two private companies as an accountant before I came to the UK. I was general manager for the finance department and audited all the accounts for the company. I planned to do post graduate studies and go step by step to the highest level of qualification. It’s not easy here. I always hear very depressing stories about job centre plus and Action for Employment. People said it’s just waste of time so I was just searching for accountancy jobs online. I applied, but I didn’t even get shortlisted, I didn’t even get the opportunity to see what an interview is like. I then thought my qualification might not be high enough so applied for assistant accountant jobs but at interview the main reason seemed to be I didn’t have a British qualification. I don’t blame them as the way we do accounting is different. We need somebody or some organisation to help, even with a volunteering job. It would help to have an English language course related to business or accounting, to learn the terminology here. My husband is a Doctor, and they have a special programme of help, such as clinical attachments arranged. So I hope they can look at helping other qualifications and skills, not only medicine. Now I have to start again, am and doing an AAT qualification, part time and will put all my effort into studying again. I have a family to support and want my children to see me going to work, so when they grow up they will want that one day. When I go back to my country, it will be difficult; I will be behind, the same as here. I won’t be familiar with the new system there”

“I loved to watch all the social affairs on TV, so I decided to read media at university. When I finished my masters I taught language and culture full time at the university, but I also worked part time in TV. In the beginning I was the news reader. When I went out on the streets, people recognised me. Then I produced programmes for women, about women. It covered subjects like family life, about educating children. Sometimes we interviewed women of history, for instance if they are a minister or head teacher, an inventor, or if they did a very good thing. When I came to the UK I couldn’t speak English at all, but I had ambition to establish the same things I had in the past in my country. It hasn’t been easy but I’ve set up an educational organisation for the local Sunderland people, including refugees and asylum seekers”

“I used to be a GP for 17 years. I have been living here about 6 years now and because my English is not very good I am not able to work as a doctor. So I try to improve my language skills by attending English classes. However my comment on my English language skills is not satisfactory. I think that the most obvious reason for this problem is not having the opportunity to be focused on studying. There are many things to think about, such as relationship with job centre, housing, difficulty in paying bills, but the worst thing is that you can’t get the right direction in the first place, so we are wondering in a confusing and sophisticated system for a long period of time. You can say that the native people also have the same problems but believe me it is much harder for refugee professionals to establish themselves here and use their skills, which I am sure could be beneficial for the country “

“I didn’t manage to finish my university course in Liberia, as war started and I had to flee to the Ivory Coast. I set up business there, and then had to flee again when the war started there. I have been in the UK for 7 years. Quite simply, until 2010 I was not allowed to work and not allowed to set up a business. I am not a young man anymore. I have lost the years in my life when I could be building a career or business ”

“My father was a secondary school teacher and qualified in all the subjects he taught. It was the highlight of his life. He is always remembering the good times, when he was actually something and someone. But when he came here everything changed. His qualifications didn’t actually mean anything here, so they didn’t recognise those qualifications. First he worked in a steel factory, then he got a job in construction as a crane driver. As a teacher there’s respect from everyone. I guess it has affected him in a way. It has changed his view of himself and this country. He is a teacher in my eyes. Everything I’ve learned and everything I am today I think he has taught me. He has taught me that it’s not about where you are from, even though you should always remember that, but it’s about what you want to be. And you should always aim high and get there. I am doing voluntary work, helping in computer classes at the community centre. It’s a step closer to teaching. When the students learn something, just the joy on their faces, the way they light up when they learn something new, the feeling I get when I think I actually taught them that, so I think that’s actually the best thing about teaching. I think they should try to recognise people with skills from other countries a bit more. It does actually mean something, they are actually qualified, so even though it might not be exactly the level here it is something and they should be given that chance to actually try and have a go. Not just write them off because they are from a different country. I think everyone should be given an equal chance”.

Our thanks to our members, who refer here to life before they had to flee from:
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Guinea, India, Iran, Iraq, Kurdistan, Liberia, Sudan, Zimbabwe and west and southern
Africa