

RECOGNISING SKILLS AND QUALIFICATIONS: A BRITISH EXPERIENCE

According to the British Refugee Council's register of refugee doctors, there are near 1,000 refugee medical doctors in Britain unable to work because of recognition difficulties, despite substantial experience in their native countries. There might well be another 1,000 doctors who still remain un-registered. On the other hand, the British Medical Association (BMA) estimates that the National Health Service (NHS) is currently short of 20,000 doctors and consultants. Refugees could very rapidly make a 10% contribution to closing this huge gap.

RETAS, a refugee agency (and a division of Education Action International, previously World University Service) had known for a long time that whilst the NHS faced acute shortages of health professionals, refugee doctors were languishing in the UK with no possibility of getting work. A Department of Health report in 1999 recognised the potential contribution of refugees to the NHS and encouraged charitable agencies and training providers to establish programmes to help refugees to re-qualify. The EQUAL DP called Linking EQUAL Access for the Disadvantaged and Excluded Refugees (LEADER) gave RETAS a magic opportunity to use part of the programme to establish a support package to facilitate and speed up the process of medical re-qualification.

The package included initial advice on the medical re-qualification process and employment opportunities in the NHS. This was followed by a mentoring stage in which a UK doctor would coach a refugee doctor and provide intensive guidance on the medical culture, career opportunities and specialist training in the UK. RETAS was able to refer refugee doctors to Southwark College and other providers that delivered training to prepare doctors for the various stages which comprise the re-qualification process (an English Test, and Professional and Linguistic Assessments Board (PLAB) level 1 and PLAB level 2 that judge their medical knowledge) to gain formal registration by the General Medical Council (GMC). The preparation normally involved a period of unpaid work experience called 'clinical attachments' which gave refugee doctors an understanding of UK medical practice and the NHS.

For the first time, more than 9000 overseas qualified doctors were registered with the GMC in 2003 of which an estimated 10% were refugees. The DP included about 200 refugee doctors at various stages in the process of medical re-qualification. This EQUAL project provided refugee doctors with the hope that rebuilding their lives and careers was not an impossible dream and according to GMC statistics, 90% of doctors who passed PLAB found a job within a year and benefited society at large in such an important human field.

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