



**CONSTRUCTION**  
FOUNDATION OF BC

Supporting Syrian Refugee Integration  
in the Construction Sector

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## About Almontaser Aljundy

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Almontaser Aljundy is originally from Syria and arrived in Canada in 2015 after receiving a World University Service of Canada scholarship. In the summer of 2016 he worked with the Construction Foundation of BC to lead a project which gathered and provided information about construction careers to refugees on Vancouver Island.

Almontaser started his undergraduate program in mechanical engineering at Damascus University, where he completed three years of studies before the revolution started in 2011. As a student, he initiated a peaceful students' movement but was imprisoned and subsequently expelled from school. He fled Syria in 2012 under threat after refusing to join the military.

After leaving Syria, Almontaser moved between Egypt, Turkey, and finally Lebanon where he volunteered with different organizations in many capacities. He assisted Syrian Eyes with the distribution of essential resources to Syrian refugees in a UNHRC designated camp. He worked with the Garsa Emergency Education project as a teacher and manager supporting children who had recently fled war zones in Syria, and he led projects related to gender equality with other refugees, specifically, improving the situation for women.

He continues to complete his post-secondary education at the University of Victoria in the faculty of engineering.

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# Executive Summary

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The purpose of this project was to support refugees to identify employment opportunities in the construction sector. The main contacts were primarily the recently arrived group from Syria on Vancouver Island. This was a ten-week project lead by a summer student on behalf of the Construction Foundation of BC and it focussed on providing information about construction jobs, trades training and apprenticeship while gathering information about previous work experience and general interest in construction based employment.

On Vancouver Island there have been approximately 190 individuals arrived in the last 8 months with the majority based in Victoria. In the course of this project, information was gathered from 42 Syrian males age 16-55, and 2 Syrian females. It was identified that half this group have previous experience in construction related employment and around three quarters are interested in construction work. However, most newcomers face several barriers to workforce integration including basic English language competency.

This project faced some limitations in that it engaged almost exclusively male Syrians. While there were several opportunities identified to support refugee transitions to employment in the sector, several key challenges remain.

## Introduction

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### Main Objectives

The main objective of this project was to engage the refugee community for two main purposes.

1. First, providing refugees with information in Arabic about work in the construction industry, career options, trades apprenticeship programs, and other trade training programs.
2. Second, was to gather information from refugees including their past work experience and interest in construction. A specific focus on youth interest in trade careers programs at the high school level was also identified within the scope of the project.

### Methodology

Information was gathered by arranging formal and informal meetings with refugees. These meetings were used to present the information and surveys relating to opportunities in the construction industry.

## Formal meetings

Presentations were arranged with other Settlement Support organizations. We successfully hosted two presentations for adults with the Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria and one other presentation with Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society for youth under 25 years of age.

## Informal meetings

Informal meetings included visiting refugees in their homes or in public places. These meetings were held in Victoria, Duncan, and Nanaimo.

## Surveys and information

Key information from pamphlets and website documents were translated into Arabic for the refugees. The information provided to the refugees came from many sources such as the Industry Training Authority, the BC Construction Association, WorkSafeBC and Work BC.

These documents explained to the refugees, what a trade is, the different trade apprenticeship programs, the Foundation program, trades training programs for high school students, a list of high schools in the South Vancouver Island area that offer trade training courses, workers' safety rights and responsibilities in the workplace.

There were two types of surveys created to gather information about refugees; one for adults and one for youth. Adult surveys included general but impersonal questions such as:

- Where do you live?
- When did you arrive in Canada?
- How well do you speak English?
- What were your professions back home?
- Have you found work in Canada?
- Are you interested in work in trades here in Canada?
- What is your past work experience?

Youth survey included the same impersonal questions in addition to:

- What career options are you interested in?
- What school are you currently attending?
- Are you interested in trades training during or after high school?
- Which trade are you interested in?

On August 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016 a tour of Camosun College was organized. The tour introduced newcomers to all the options in the English Language Development center, including the Trades English programs. The Trades English program might be very helpful for newcomers who want work in Trades once they achieve Level 4 CLB.

The tour also introduced refugees to the different trades programs and the requirements to enroll in these programs. We also visited the Financial Aid department, explaining to newcomers how they can apply for grants and financial aid to pay for their education.

## Data

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### Refugee Demographics

In total 45 refugees were contacted and met with. The refugee population that was contacted are primarily Syrian males. There are also two Syrian females, and one male from Sudan.

This group of refugees represents 70 - 80% of the current male Syrian newcomers on the Island. While efforts were made to reach all refugee newcomers, almost all people met are males. There are two main reasons for this; the first was that attention to appropriate methods for this group limited direct contact between the project lead and women. As well, the focus was on employment in the construction industry which is not popular for women in this group.

### Age

At the beginning of the project, we tried to categorize people into two age groups adults and youth (high-school students). That was not accurate presumption because there are many young people who do not fit in either category.

By analyzing the collected Data, we can find that:

- 13% of people met are 18 years old and under, most of whom are enrolled in high-school.
- 15% of them are 19-25 years old, though they may not have finished high-school. They are primarily single and do not have dependents to take care of.
- 72% of them are 26-55 years old and all of them are fathers, they all have families with an average 4 children per household.

### English challenge

Most of the refugees struggle with basic English and they have no previous English knowledge or experience. When asked to identify their language ability, the following was identified:

- 6.5% of refugees cannot speak English at all. The majority of them are men over 45 years old who are having trouble learning English.
- 61% of them have poor English language skills. The majority of their English skills come from interacting with Canadians and attending English classes.
- 24% of them identify that they have good English skills. The majority of them are younger refugees under 25 years old, who may have taken English classes before coming to Canada.

Some of the refugees have begun their English classes; others are waiting to start classes. Demand for level one classes from this group is high and it has been identified that several service providers are working to open more opportunities. This includes Camosun which has not hosted a Level 1 CLB class for some time.

Overall English is the biggest challenge for refugees. Without good English skills, they will not be able to communicate properly, find themselves jobs, or socialize and thus face challenges integrating and finding financial independence in Canada.

## Previous work experiences

As the data shows, most of the 16 men under 25 years old have no previous work experience, only one has previous work experience. This individual worked as a plumber for two years while he was in Lebanon.

23 people, or 50% of all the newcomers surveyed, have a variety of construction related experience and/or vocational education. There are two especial cases; two men have their experiences recognized with a certificate from the companies they worked for while still in Syria. One was a welder and the other worked in the petroleum industry.

Of those with experience in construction, there are a wide variety of trades and professions. These include up to 6 professional drivers, 2 with rebar experience, 3 carpenters, several with automotive or motorcycle mechanic experience, several with farming or landscaping, and a variety of others who could be considered generalists or labourers.

The remaining 25% have experience in other professions.

## Construction interest

34 persons who were contacted are interested in construction and they are willing to start work in the construction sector. Those who have no work experience are interested in construction related trades as a potential career choice. Those who have past experience want to have it recognized so they can continue their careers in Canada.

The other refugees who were spoken to did not express interest in the construction industry.

Many expressed an urgent interest in employment. However, there is a general interest in securing English language abilities first. In one case when an individual was presented with an employment opportunity he was quick to decline stating he needed better English. This is likely a common perspective among this group.

Most refugees are concerned with how they can be independent after their first-year sponsorship ends. The majority of refugees said they would take any kind of work, as long as it allowed them to be independent. While they wanted to continue their careers they had in Syria, they were primarily concerned with having any kind of income.

## Barriers Refugees Face When Settling in Canada

### The absence of women

Women refugees were harder to reach due to many reasons.

- Often, women refugees may not be independent or able to make their own decisions. Often, the husband is in charge of making decisions for the family.
- The stereotype that construction is a man's job has prevented women from exploring a career in construction related trades.
- In the Victoria refugee community women often are in charge of taking care of the household.

### Resettling progress

Most of the refugees are still very busy with their resettling progress. They are getting accustomed to life in Canada, enrolling their children in schools, immigration paperwork, enrolling in English classes, and other tasks. Since they are not familiar with life in Canada they often rely on programs to do things for them. For example, finding jobs for them.

### Language and communication

As mentioned before, most of the refugees have poor English skills. Some of them have enrolled in English classes and the others are waiting to enroll. The refugees believe their poor English skills are preventing from finding employment.

### Peer pressure

There is a big peer pressure within the Syrian refugees' community. Each family is an especial case and has different advantages and opportunities. For example, there are many people pressured to move to other communities, like Toronto, that are perceived to have more advantages. The difference in benefits between private sponsors and private and government sponsorship has been problematic. The nonhomogeneous sponsorship system has created a disparity between refugees and the benefits and services they receive. This disparity has resulted in stress, instability, and inactivity for some refugees.

### Closed groups

In the course of this project, it was identified that some refugees have formed closed groups within the refugee community. They tend to make their decisions together. These small groups tend to isolate themselves from Canadian society and even the refugee community. This may be a result of previous experiences. Some individuals may be quick not to trust others or are cautious as they do not want to be taken advantage of by other people. This kind of attitude is understandable within the refugee community. Those who have spent time in refugee camps often had their human rights disrespected or were taken advantage of by NGO's, governments or private individuals. Over time they may need support to identify their rights and how they are protected.



## Employability

Refugees can be a viable source of employees for the construction industry. They have many areas in need of improvements such as English skills, work experience in Canada, and workplace culture. Which are currently being provided by resettlement organizations.

## Recommendations for Employment Preparation and Employment Services

### Overcoming the language barrier

Poor English skills is the biggest challenge that this group of refugees will face during their integration progress. Many refugees have stated they would like time to focus on learning English before moving on to finding employment and other things. In most cases, it would be ideal to allow them to complete the first two levels of English courses prior to employment, this would take 6 months. This would encourage confidence and increase safety on job sites.

In addition to the regular English classes, supporting them to register in the Trades English program which is offered by Camosun College can have a positive impact. The trades English class will help them learn the terminology and jargon of the construction industry, however requires a baseline Level CLB 4 or 5.

### Career exploration for young refugees

The young refugees who are interested in construction and have no experience are looking for a place to start their career. A project to support refugees could help them to make informed decisions about their career. Shadowing opportunities and Discovery Workshops about different trades will allow them explore the opportunities available to them and build interest in the construction industry. This project could then help those who are interested in the construction industry find employment and a potential sponsor to start their apprenticeship.

In the case of shortage of employers and sponsors, the Support Refugee Project could help refugees enroll in the Foundation Program. This would help them gain skills and become more employable.

### Refugees with previous experiences

Refugees who have previous work experience in the construction sector will be annoyed if they are required to start their careers over again. After they complete their English and trades English courses, the next step would be to help them continue, not restart, their careers in Canada. This can include starting with helping them prepare for the challenge test through targeted studying support, upgrading classes and practice tests. After they get their experience certified, they may need additional help to connect to employment.

### Subsidies to employers

Initial research into employment support programming for refugees has demonstrated some effective tools that facilitate long term employment integration. Wage subsidies and employer

targeted subsidies for training can be an effective way of mitigating the perception of risk when hiring refugees.

Support projects could look to motivate employers to hire more refugees with a subsidy program. However, subsidies on their own would be ineffective if individuals are not prepared for the job site. Therefore, any subsidy program should be incorporated with English Language training, safety preparation and individual assessment and transition planning to ensure that previous experiences are best put to use.

## Conclusion

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As a result of this project, most male refugees on Vancouver Island are more aware of opportunities in the construction industry including trades training, certification, regulation, and work opportunities. As well, many youth and high-school students are now aware of trades training during high school and the opportunities in construction related careers.

The majority of refugees have previous work experience, especially in construction. This makes them great potential workforce for the industry. Investing in the refugee community will help integrate them into the labour market. This will offer the construction industry skilled and hardworking employee, while also helping refugees find meaningful employment.