

**SNAPSHOT
ASSESSMENT ON
EMPLOYMENT OF
RESETTLED
REFUGEES IN THE
UK**

2021

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Hadir was resettled with her mother and sister from Iraq to Greater Manchester

“If I find a job that I like it will make me feel like I belong, like I am starting a new life and I will be able to integrate with society, have more confidence and I will be able to support my family.”

Walid¹, 42, Syrian refugee, Northern Ireland.

“I think it will be better for the government to know [a refugee’s] details and whatever they have a certificate in, and then to put them as a volunteer, direct them to jobs available, and say to the refugee “this is where you belong; this is your direction”

Fatima, 44, Syrian refugee, South West England

¹ All names have been changed and identifying details changed or removed to preserve participants’ anonymity.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For a refugee who has finally found safety in a new country, returning to their profession, or finding new work can be a hugely important step in rebuilding their life. Refugees living in the UK come from very diverse backgrounds and each has their own story to tell with many having significant skills, experience and qualifications. However, regardless of their career background, refugees often find it more difficult to gain employment when compared to others, such as migrants or nationals, living in the UK.

This report by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, presents the findings of an assessment focused on the employment and employability of refugees resettled to the UK. Carried out between June and September 2020, the research is based on first-hand accounts of 14 resettled refugees living across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The study focused on those who had had time to settle in the UK and who were either: working, looking for work; or hoping to work soon.

For participants, finding work in the UK was critically important to help them feel settled in a new place, support their families in the UK and in some cases, their relatives overseas with remittances. However, many found the employment journey much harder than they envisaged before they arrived. English language skills were a key challenge but far from the only issue, with other major barriers including a lack of clear information and advice about job options and training, health issues and challenges in transferring their qualifications. Many participants who had found work attributed this to the individualised face to face advice they had received - whether from local authority resettlement caseworkers, Job Centre Plus (JCP) job coaches, or support from their local community. Those we spoke to had many valuable suggestions about what could be improved to support them and other refugees into employment. Their key recommendations included access to effective employment casework support, accurate and realistic advice on qualifications transfer, more English language learning opportunities (including learning tailored to employment), improved engagement and advice from JCP coaches and making better use of the waiting period between selection for resettlement and departure to the UK.

The research was conducted during a peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. Participants highlighted that the pandemic may have had an impact on their employment journey, particularly given the disruption to their English language classes. Those looking for work before the pandemic now found their job search much more challenging especially as several participants had been looking at opportunities in hospitality, a sector badly affected. With JCP centres closed, some applicants were concerned that they were missing out on referrals, training or job opportunities. More positively, for the participants who were already working, all had managed to keep their jobs despite the economic impact of the pandemic.

All refugees resettled in the UK, including participants in this study, had been prioritized for resettlement by UNHCR based on their protection risks and vulnerabilities they faced, and not on other criteria such as their education or employment experience. This remains an important non-discriminatory principle of UNHCR's resettlement programmes. Nonetheless, UNHCR was interested to understand how a refugee's profile prior to resettlement might influence their journey towards employment once resettled. Based on the profiles and experiences of the 14 participants in this study, no obvious links were identified between participants' employment history, their educational, professional, or vulnerability profile before resettlement and the likelihood they would be in paid employment in the UK several years later. Whilst fluency in English was a key enabler for employment, some participants in employment had arrived with no English skills and, with the right support, had learned English quickly. Yet others who spoke English prior to arrival had still not found work, which they attributed to a lack of tailored employment support. Whilst the study is small, the findings suggest that it may be difficult to predict how quickly a refugee would find work in the UK based on their employment history and education before they arrive.

The UK's resettlement programmes have provided a lifeline to many thousands of refugees over the years. Our recommendations in this report, including some simple steps, are directed at strengthening the integration and employment support provided to refugees after they are accepted for resettlement to the UK. Such measures would better enable refugees to reach their full potential in employment and enhance the sustainability of the UK's resettlement programmes in the long term.

INTRODUCTION

Despite many refugees in the UK having skills, experience and qualifications, they find it more difficult to gain employment when compared with people born in the UK.² Research also suggests this disparity can be more pronounced for resettled refugees than refugees who come through an asylum system.³

There is a great deal of research which examines refugees' path to employment in the UK and other countries.⁴ Studies and reports have repeatedly identified common barriers which make it harder for refugees to find work. These include:

- Lack of knowledge of the local language (almost always cited as the most significant barrier);
- Mental or physical health issues;
- Issues with recognition of overseas qualifications and skills;
- Lack of knowledge of the local labour market;
- Non-transferable skills;
- Family/care responsibilities;
- Lack of personal or social networks;
- Unconscious bias from employers; and
- Employers' lack of familiarity with refugees' right to work.

² Kone, Z et al, Refugees and the UK Labour Market, April 2019, ECONREF, COMPAS, University of Oxford, <https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/ECONREF-Refugees-and-the-UKLabourMarket-report.pdf>. Note that this report does not actually refer to unemployment figures for 'refugees' by legal status but rather 'asylum migrants' defined as those whose motivation to come to the UK was to seek asylum.

³ Deloitte & Refugee Studies Centre, *Talent displaced: The economic lives of Syrian refugees in Europe*, 2017: <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/About-Deloitte/talent-displaced-syrian-refugees-europe.pdf>

⁴ Kone, Z et al, Refugees and the UK Labour Market, April 2019, ECONREF, COMPAS, University of Oxford, <https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/ECONREF-Refugees-and-the-UKLabourMarket-report.pdf>, Ruiz, I., & Vargas-Silva, C., Differences in labour market outcomes between natives, refugees and other migrants in the UK, *Journal of Economic Geography*, 2017, ICIBI, *An Inspection of the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme August 2017 – January 2018*, 2018: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/705155/VPRS_Final_Artwork_revised.pdf.

Collyer, M., Morrice, L., Tip, L., Brown, R. and Odermatt, E., *A Long Term Commitment: Integration of Resettled Refugees in the UK*, 2018, available online: <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/migration/research/integrationcitizenship/refugeeresettlement/reports>,

Tweed, A., & Stacey, S., *Refugee Employment Support in the UK: Insights into services, barriers, and best practice to support refugees into employment across the UK*, commissioned by the Refugee Employment Network, March 2018, UNHCR, *The labour market integration of resettled refugees* PDES/2013/16, November 2013: <https://www.unhcr.org/5273a9e89.pdf>,

OECD (2016) *Making Integration Work: Refugees and others in need of protection*, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Available online: <http://www.oecd.org/migration/making-integration-work-humanitarian-migrants9789264251236-en.html>,

Linda Morrice, Linda K Tip, Michael Collyer, Rupert Brown, *You can't have a good integration when you don't have a good communication': English-language learning among resettled refugees in England*, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, fez023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fez023>,

Deloitte & Refugee Studies Centre, *Talent displaced: The economic lives of Syrian refugees in Europe*, 2017: <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/About-Deloitte/talent-displaced-syrian-refugees-europe.pdf>,

Gibb, C., *Effective Partnerships: A report on engaging employers to improve refugee employment in the UK*, 2018, <https://refugeeemploymentnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Effective-Partnerships-A-report-on-engaging-employers-to-improve-refugee-employment-by-Charlotte-Gibb.pdf>

In 2017, UNHCR published *Towards Integration*,⁵ a participatory assessment with Syrian refugees resettled under the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS). The assessment considered the early integration experiences of 167 Syrian refugees and found that overall the resettlement programme was working relatively well. Nonetheless, the study found significant areas for improvement including in English language provision and the need for support on the road to employment. This snapshot assessment represents a short follow-up assessment to look specifically at the employment and employability situation for refugees resettled to the UK more than three years ago, looking at a similar cohort (though not necessarily the same individuals) to those who participated in the 2017 study and also a smaller number of refugees resettled under other UK resettlement programmes. The assessment builds on employment-related data and analysis from *Safer and Stronger*,⁶ UNHCR's 2019 participatory assessment with resettled women.

The refugees interviewed for this assessment have spent several years in the UK. They have had time to reflect on their early years and to look back at their own path towards employment in the UK. The assessment presents refugees' first-hand accounts of their search for employment in the UK and their own views about how they might be best supported into decent and fulfilling employment. To a more limited extent, the assessment also considers what impact, if any, resettled refugees' educational, linguistic, specific needs/ or vulnerability profile prior to coming to the UK, has on their pathway to paid employment after they arrive.

⁵ UNHCR, 2017, *Towards Integration*, <https://www.unhcr.org/protection/basic/5a0ae9e84/towards-integration-the-syrian-vulnerable-persons-resettlement-scheme-in.html>

⁶ UNHCR, 2020, *Safer and Stronger: Experiences of Refugee Women Resettled to the UK*, <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/5f2d47eb4.pdf>



Refugee chefs share recipes during Ramadan

Resettlement

Resettlement is an important legal mechanism, which enables those refugees with the most compelling protection needs in their country of asylum to be transferred to safety. Only a small - although growing - number of states resettle refugees, providing places for a tiny fraction of the world's refugees. There were 20.4 million refugees of concern to UNHCR around the world at the end of 2019, but less than half of one per cent were resettled that year. For this reason, UNHCR advocates that spaces are prioritized for refugees based on the protection risks they face and their need for a durable solution. Where states introduce selection criteria based on speculative integration potential (such as education level or work experience) this can have a significant negative impact on UNHCR's ability to identify and refer refugees whose lives are most at risk.

The UK Government has emerged as a global leader in resettlement in recent years. Between January 2014 and March 2021, the UK Government resettled 26,661 refugees under four different resettlement

schemes: the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS), Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (VCRS), the Gateway Protection Programme (GPP) and Mandate Resettlement Scheme (MRS)⁷. Of those resettled since 2014, the majority (20,319 people) came through the VPRS and VCRS (1,838). Refugees for the UK's resettlement programmes are identified and prioritized by UNHCR for referral to the UK based on the risks they face and their particular vulnerabilities in their country of asylum. As the Home Office explains in its current resettlement policy statement,⁸ the UK's schemes allow UNHCR to refer those most in need of assistance:

“Our resettlement schemes offer a safe and legal route to the UK for the most vulnerable refugees. We purposefully target those in greatest need of assistance, including people requiring urgent medical treatment, survivors of violence and torture, and women and children at risk. We work closely with UNHCR, the global refugee agency, to identify those living in formal refugee camps, informal settlements and host communities who would benefit most from resettlement to the UK. Our resettlement schemes are not selective on the basis of employability or integration potential. Apart from the criteria we set for each scheme, we do not seek to influence which cases are referred to us by UNHCR.”

On 17 June 2019, the UK Government announced its intention to continue resettling in the region of 5,000 refugees over the course of 2020-21 under a new global scheme consolidating VPRS, VCRS and GPP schemes called the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS). However, due to the impact of COVID-19, all resettlement to the UK has largely been suspended since March 2020. In 2021, resettlement restarted in the UK though at low levels, and by March 2021 the UKRS had resettled 25 refugees.⁹ At the time of writing the UK Government has not confirmed the resettlement quota or parameters of the programme to come. UNHCR UK hopes the UK Government will provide more details on its UK resettlement plans soon. Confirming new quotas will offer hope for refugees facing serious protection risks and allow UNHCR and those working on the crucial programme — like local authorities — to make plans, including in relation

⁷ House of Commons Library, “Asylum Statistics”, 1 July 2021. Available at: [SN01403.pdf \(parliament.uk\)](#)

⁸ UK Home Office, Resettlement: policy statement, 2018, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/730643/Resettlement_Policy_document_.pdf

⁹ Home Office, National Statistics, “Summary of latest statistics”, Updated 18 June 2021. Available at: [Summary of latest statistics - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

to integration and employment support programmes discussed in this report.

Resettlement must be non-discriminatory: UNHCR promotes the establishment of resettlement programmes which are non-discriminatory. Refugees should be selected for resettlement on the basis of their needs and protection risks, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, religion, family size, education, professional experience or other factors.¹⁰ Discriminatory selection criteria adopted by some resettlement States can limit the access to resettlement for refugees most at risk, and have a negative impact overall on the global resettlement programme.

Support towards employment

A measure of effective resettlement is not only how many refugees in need of resettlement have access to this solution each year, but also how well they are received and supported to becoming full participants in their new communities. Resettlement programmes must thus focus on integration to be sustainable and to grow, a principle recognised in the 3 Year Global Strategy on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways¹¹ which the UK played a key role in developing.

Refugees who arrive under the UK's various resettlement schemes are provided with reception and integration support in their first years in the UK by a combination of local authorities, specialist support NGOs and in some cases, community sponsorship groups. Resettled refugees arrive with legal immigration status¹² which includes the right to work in the UK. Local authorities and community sponsorship groups provide casework support in the early years which must include facilitation of English language learning and assistance towards employment.¹³ Refugees attending the Job Centre Plus for benefit assessments should also receive support and advice on employment.

¹⁰ UNHCR, Resettlement Handbook, 2011, <https://www.unhcr.org/46f7c0ee2.pdf>

¹¹ UNHCR, The Three-Year Strategy (2019-2021) on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways, <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/protection/resettlement/5d15db254/three-year-strategy-resettlement-complementary-pathways.html>

¹² Usually given five years' leave to remain after which they can apply to stay in the UK permanently.

¹³ UK Home Office, Funding Instruction for local authorities in the support of the United Kingdom's Resettlement Schemes, Financial Year 2020-2021, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/877261/2020-2021_LA_Funding_Instruction_v1.0_-_Final1.pdf

Across the UK there are also many organisations and programmes which aim specifically to support refugees into employment by providing volunteering opportunities, CV writing support, one-to-one support, training opportunities, interview practice, language lessons and mentoring.¹⁴ In previous studies, UNHCR has observed that the quality and availability of refugee employment support varies widely across the UK and therefore welcomed the creation of the Refugee Employment Network which brings together organisations supporting refugees into employment.¹⁵ Many businesses in the UK have also set up employability programmes for refugees in partnership with NGOs. In 2018, recognising the importance of the private sector in supporting refugees into employment UNHCR produced *Guidelines to Help British Businesses Employ Refugees*¹⁶ in partnership with the UK Home Office, the Department for Work and Pensions, IOM and Business in the Community. Unlike refugees who are resettled to the UK, refugees who are recognised through the UK asylum system do not receive government-provided integration or employment casework support, though many will ultimately be supported to some degree by refugee support organisations. Whilst this study only considers the experiences of resettled refugees in the UK, many of the findings will apply to the situation of refugees in the UK who have come by different pathways.

METHODOLOGY

The assessment was conducted through in-depth interviews with refugees resettled across the UK.¹⁷ Participants were interviewed from June to September 2020 by video call or phone and led through a semi-structured interview covering their experiences in employment or searching for it in the UK. Participation was voluntary.

The assessment focussed on refugees who were:

¹⁴ This assessment is not considering specific employment support programmes in any depth. For further information on the range of employment support programmes across the UK see Tweed, A., & Stacey, S., *Refugee Employment Support in the UK: Insights into services, barriers, and best practice to support refugees into employment across the UK*, commissioned by the Refugee Employment Network, March 2018, <https://transitions-london.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Refugee-Employment-Support-2018.pdf>.

¹⁵ For further information on the Refugee Employment Network and a directory of refugee employment support organizations visit <https://refugeeemploymentnetwork.co.uk/what-we-do>

¹⁶ For examples see UNHCR, UK Home Office, DWP, BITC and IOM, *Tapping Potential: Guidelines to Help British Businesses Employ Refugees*, April 2019, available from www.unhcr.org/5cc9c7ed4.

¹⁷ The geographic scope of the assessment was England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. However, no refugee invitees from Wales responded so interviews only cover refugees living in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

- Resettled to the UK (under Gateway Protection Programme, VPRS or Vulnerable Children’s Resettlement Programme (VCRS) and programmes);
- Resettled between 2014 – 2017;
- Supported on arrival via local authorities¹⁸
- Adults (over 18); and
- Either in paid employment; or
- Looking for and/or working towards paid employment. Working towards paid employment included volunteering, vocational training, study or English language learning with an aspiration to be in paid employment within the next 2 years.

The study included interviewees with disabilities and medical needs identified at the time UNHCR identified them for resettlement.

Individuals who met the above criteria were selected from UNHCR’s database of refugees previously resettled to the UK. Selection considered the following variables to ensure a mix of participants with a range of

- levels of education;
- professions;
- employable skills; and
- language abilities

As UNHCR does not hold data on where refugees are resettled to in the UK, the UK Home Office supported the study by sending out invitations to refugees through local authorities. The Home Office also assisted by ensuring a mix of invitations to refugees who, based on Home Office data were

- employed, looking for work or not employed at the end of their first year in the UK; and
- living in rural and urban areas¹⁹

SAMPLE

As explained above, the assessment only included refugees who were looking for and/or working towards paid employment and deliberate efforts

¹⁸ Refugees supported by Community Sponsorship Groups in the UK were not included in this study

¹⁹ The Home Office’s role in the study was limited to the identification of some profiles (as described) and sending out invitations to participants on UNHCR’s behalf. No personal information about participants gathered during this assessment has or will be shared with the Home Office for this study, neither has or will any personal information about participants shared by the Home Office with UNHCR for this study.

were made to ensure the sample included refugees known to be unemployed or employed at the end of their first year in the UK. The findings of the assessment can therefore only be generalised to refugees in this group.

Gender – The majority of participants identified for the study were men (11) with a smaller number of women (3). A higher proportion of men were interviewed because a complementary study which looks at refugee integration (including employment pathways) for refugee women resettled to the UK has recently been conducted by UNHCR in the UK.²⁰ Together the two assessments present an overall picture of the employment situation for both refugee women and men.

Age – Seven participants were between 29 – 40 years of age and seven were between 41-51 years.

UK location - in total, 14 refugees participated from 3 nations (England, Scotland and Northern Ireland) and 10 regions of the UK.²¹

Education – Participants had a wide range of educational backgrounds and qualifications. Three participants had limited formal education and could not read or write well in any language including two participants who finished school at primary level.

Eight participants had attended University / tertiary education before arrival in the UK, with six holding degrees or diplomas from outside the UK in engineering, business, psychology, law, dentistry, and chemistry.

Five participants had completed training or held some other qualification, completed either prior to arrival or once in the UK ²², including:

- AutoCAD (in the UK)
- European Computer Driving License (in the UK)
- Early childhood education course (in the UK)
- Technical repairs (in Syria)
- International hairdressing certificate (in Syria)
- Heavy Goods Vehicle license (in the UK)
- IT course (in the UK)
- Communication, problem-solving, working with others, numeracy and customer service (in the UK)

²⁰ UNHCR, 2020, *Safer and Stronger; Experiences of Refugee Women Resettled to the UK*, <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/5f2d47eb4.pdf>

²¹ West Midlands, South East, Scotland, Northwest, Northern Ireland, South East, North West, South West, London, Yorkshire and Humber

²² List below includes some of those participants above who also held degrees.

- Forklift driver training (in the UK)

Employment history – Almost all participants (13) had been in paid employment at some point before coming to the UK. Participants' employment histories varied widely and most had been in several roles and not just one career. The range of employment backgrounds comprised

- Engineer (1)
- Secretary (2)
- Mathematics teacher (1)
- Science and mathematics teacher (1)
- Lawyer (1)
- Dental technician (1)
- Accountant (2)
- Construction worker/manager (6)
- Electrician (1)
- Hospitality (2)
- Production operator (1)
- Taxi driver (2)
- Other physical labour (2)

Languages – At the point of resettlement consideration 11 participants reported they could read and write in their native language and three participants could not read and write easily. Nine participants reported that they could speak and understand limited English before coming to the UK.

Time in the UK – participants had spent between 1.5 and 5 years in the UK, with an average time of 3.9 years.

- Two participants – 1.5- 2 years
- One participant – 2.5 – 3 years
- Six participants - 3-3.5 years
- Four participants 4 – 4.5
- One participant -4.5 – 5 years

Urban or rural location – 6 participants lived in major cities, 4 in large towns, 3 in medium towns and 1 in a small town

CURRENT EMPLOYMENT STATUS IN THE UK



Eritrean engineer retakes degree and finds employment

All participants interviewed for the assessment said that finding paid employment in the UK was very important to them. Except for two participants who signed off from work due to health issues, all were either already working (4), or were actively looking for work (8).²³

Overwhelmingly participants said that finding work was important to them because it would help them feel settled in a new place, support their families in the UK and in some cases, their relatives outside the UK with remittances. Participants reported that having a job would hopefully mean improved confidence and more communication with local people which several found lacking in their lives.

Participants were keen to point out that work was critical for them to contribute and be seen to contribute to society. It would enable them to be more immersed in UK culture and to share their own. Several reported frustrations with lost time in their careers during their displacement – lengthy periods without work resulted in feelings of low self-worth and mood. They wanted to get back to work quickly, to help them establish confidence and purpose.

²³ This is expected given the inclusion criteria which mean that participants were either in paid employment; or looking for and/or working towards paid employment.

“I want to work. I want to try and give it a go and connect with people and get some friends. I’m not here as a visitor I was to stay here forever. I have to be useful and get friends and colleagues. I learn from friends and learn about the new country culture and if I understand the new culture I’m going to respect and then they will respect my culture as well.”

Jamal, 34, Syrian refugee living in Scotland

Of the 14 participants interviewed, all had been working in their country of asylum before arrival, usually in manual labour or jobs outside their previous careers. Six had been in paid employment in the UK, five of whom were working at the time of the interview.²⁴ Of those working, two were working in the same sector as they had worked in their country of asylum, with the remaining two working in lower-skilled jobs compared to their country of asylum. The table below shows their job in the UK, the length of time in the position, time to employment in the UK, and previous occupations in their country of asylum or origin.

Job in the UK	Length of time working in the UK	Time it took to find paid employment in the UK	Occupation in the country of origin	Occupation in the country of asylum
Transport	2 years	2.5 years	Taxi driver and small business owner	Taxi driver
Transport	1 year	2 years	Teacher and in construction	Construction
Construction	1.5	5 months	Lawyer	Construction
IT officer	1.5	1 year	Accountant	Accountant / humanitarian worker

²⁴ The assessment intentionally selected resettled refugees with a range of different educational and employment backgrounds known to UNHCR prior to their resettlement. Due to the selection methodology and the size of the sample, the number of participants in employment cannot be said to represent the resettled refugee population or the broader refugee population in the UK.

Hospitality (not currently employed)	Few months	1 year	Small business owner	Furniture production
Cleaner (not currently employed)	Several days	Unknown	Health worker	Secretary/health worker

Three of those currently working spoke positively about their job and career progression options in their current field, including one who was hoping to start his own business in construction if he could find the capital to start (see text box on page 11).

For the two participants no longer in employment in the UK, one had left their cleaning job immediately after starting as it was incompatible with existing health concerns. Another finished his job in a take-away food shop after a year because it required unsocial hours when he needed to be with his family and did not present him with career progression in his previous field. Both individuals are actively looking for work that would better use their existing skills and experience.

For those not in work, except for two participants currently signed off from work due to ill health, all reported working hard to find a job. They had volunteered extensively at food banks, charity shops, destitution projects, as secretaries, in garden maintenance with the council and retail shops. They had worked on their CVs, trawled job sites and submitted countless job applications. Participants continued to work on their English both in formal ESOL classes and by other means as is discussed in Section 8. Nonetheless, they remained out of work, some after several years in the UK. A summary of the barriers to employment participants presented follow in Section 7.

“They [resettled refugees] were so productive overseas and then came here and became dependent on the government, which has psychologically affected them because they feel they are not contributing to the community.”

Ahmed, 51, Sudanese refugee living in North West England

PROFILE PRIOR TO COMING TO THE UK

As explained above, UNHCR identifies and prioritizes refugees for resettlement based on their protection needs in their country of asylum. All refugees referred for resettlement to the UK, including those in this assessment, were referred based on their individual protection needs and vulnerabilities and not on their integration potential in the UK. Indeed, UNHCR's resettlement selection processes do not consider refugees based on their employability or integration potential in a country of resettlement thus preserving the protection focus of resettlement. Nonetheless, UNHCR does collect basic information about refugees' level of education, profession and special needs prior to resettlement to provide receiving authorities with some background to inform the preparation of integration support. This information is used in this assessment to understand what impact, if any, resettled refugees' educational, linguistic, specific needs / or vulnerability profile prior to coming to the UK, has on their pathway to paid employment after they arrive and to understand how refugees with different profiles might be best supported into work.

In this small sample, the assessment did not reveal any obvious links between a participant's employment history, their educational, professional, or vulnerability profile before resettlement and the likelihood they would be in work in the UK several years later. The 6 participants who had worked in the UK had a mixed educational background, for example, three had university degrees, while another had finished their formal education in early high school. For those not in work, 4 out of 8 had university degrees or professional qualifications. None of the 14 participants had been able to work in the UK in their previous field using existing qualifications. Based on these findings from this sample, it may be difficult to predict at the point of resettlement referral how quickly a refugee might find work in the UK based on their employment history and education.

People in work were more likely to have fluency in English and whilst it was clear that fluency in English is a key enabler for employment it was interesting to note that the only participant who spoke English before arriving in the UK was still out of paid employment three years after arriving (see case study on page 17 for further information). Of the three participants who were only semi-literate before coming to the UK, none had found work, and all reported significant challenges in learning English which they linked directly to difficulties finding a job.

Nine participants had been identified and referred for resettlement because they had personally or indirectly experienced violence or torture in their country of origin. In several cases, UNHCR had flagged in the resettlement referral that an individual may need specialised psychosocial support upon their resettlement. Whilst some participants identified that mental health issues acted as a barrier in their employment search (see section 9) some who were in work had mental health issues and/or experience of violence or torture identified at the time of resettlement referral, suggesting that with appropriate support these previous needs do not necessarily present a barrier to employment in the UK once resettled.

Case Study

Hassan's story

Hassan is a 40 years old refugee from Syria living in South East England. He is a lawyer now working in construction.

Hassan was a qualified lawyer in Syria where he worked for 7 years running his own small firm. He knew very limited English, just how to count and some introductory phrases. After his family fled from Syria to Turkey he began working in construction. It was difficult manual work and not in his chosen field, but Hassan needed to support his family as they received no external support in Turkey. After arriving in the UK, through the Syrian community, Hassan found a job in construction similar to the work he was doing previously in Turkey.

Whilst he still thinks about returning to his profession as a lawyer, he is aware that the process to qualify is lengthy and he now enjoys working in construction. Hassan hopes to start his own construction business if he can raise the capital, although he knows this would be challenging. He also needs advice on how to navigate the legal and administrative requirements for opening a business.

Case study

Mohammed's story

Mohammed is a 36 years old refugee from Syria living in South East England. He was a taxi driver and now is a forklift driver.

Mohammed finished school in Syria when he was 15. As a young man, he joined his family's small company, managing the company and working as a driver for 11 years. When Mohammed and his family were displaced, to Turkey he continued to work as a taxi driver to support his family, though he did not have the legal right to work. Mohammed arrived in the UK 5 years ago and 3-4 months after arrival he attempted to set up a small hospitality business with the assistance of an NGO. However, he ran into difficulties due to licensing regulations.

After 2.5 years he finally found paid work as a forklift driver where he is content in his job. He hopes to one day work as a taxi driver once he can get his license.

Key findings – Profile prior to coming to the UK

- In this sample of 14 people, there were no obvious links between a participant's employment history, their educational, professional, or vulnerability profile before resettlement and the likelihood they would be in paid employment in the UK several years later. In other words, based on this same, at the point of UNHCR resettlement submission, it may be very difficult to predict how quickly a refugee might find work in the UK based on their employment history and education.
- Limited literacy in any language presents an additional barrier to learning English and may therefore make the path to employment more challenging.
- The English language is key but far from the only challenge. Participants speaking some limited English before coming to the UK did not necessarily lead to improved employment outcomes.
- Whilst some participants identified that mental health issues acted as a barrier in their employment search (see section 9) some who were in work had mental health issues and/or experience of violence or torture identified at the time of resettlement referral, suggesting that with appropriate support, these previous needs do not necessarily present a barrier to employment in the UK once resettled.

BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

Participants were asked open questions about the most significant barriers they faced in the UK in finding employment. The most common barriers to employment mentioned by participants were:

- English language
- A lack of clear information
- Health issues (personally or supporting other family members)
- Lack of required qualification/ issues with qualification transfer
- Age
- Location in the UK
- Issues with benefits
- Lack of required experience (in the UK or otherwise)
- Difficulty obtaining a driving license
- Racial or other biases

Lesser mentioned barriers were:

- Lack of personal or social network
- Unsocial hours - family commitments
- Different work culture/requirements
- Lack of capital or information to start a business
- Administrative challenges in obtaining Disclosure and Barring (DBS) and criminal record checks
- Challenges accessing their degree from a country of asylum/ origin
- No vacancies

The most common barriers are addressed in turn below.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE



Refugees learn English

Only one participant spoke English fluently before coming to the UK and a lack of fluency in English was cited by every participant as the most significant barrier to finding a job in the UK. Those with limited previous education found immersive language learning - where only English is spoken in the class - very difficult and suggested that it may have been easier for them to learn initially with a teacher who spoke their native language.

Almost all participants noted that they would find more hours of formal English language classes useful. Several participants said learning English “on the job” and during voluntary work helped them learn English faster and to pick up language relevant to their industry. For example, one participant spoke very positively of his experience doing voluntary work supporting elderly people with IT. As a volunteer, he was able to learn the technical language which he was then able to use to successfully apply for a paid IT position with his local council.

“If you want to get to your path you need to learn the words for what you want to study for. I was trying to learn the relevant language for IT. [...] I went to the Library and did voluntary work to

help elderly people how to use IT stuff – phones and mobiles and email and laptops. From this voluntary work, I could learn English from people.”

Farid, 35, Syrian refugee living in Scotland.

Some participants noted that they had difficulty finding English courses that would fit around their work schedules.

Those that had developed most quickly described the importance of formal classes supplemented with informal but regular opportunities to learn in the community or at work. Several participants spoke very positively about community English language conversation classes where volunteers would come and speak English with them in town halls or community centres. Participants spoke about the dual efficiency of practising English and getting to know their local communities. The same participants noted that these opportunities were offered soon after their arrival but were discontinued after several sessions.

Participants described challenges around continued English language learning during COVID-19 restrictions with lessons moving online and some being cancelled altogether (see COVID-19 section 22 below).

Participants had different opinions on how to prioritize intensive English language learning and early pathways into paid work. Some thought that it was important to have intensive English classes to reach a minimum standard before looking for work, and others said that they would prefer to be able to work in jobs that required only limited English and to learn English in classes concurrently. Several participants had English teachers who helped them with job interview practice which they found helpful.

Two participants who were in work spoke very positively of their local authority caseworkers who provided clear advice at the outset about which level of English they would need to begin working in particular jobs. Both participants had a high degree of trust in their caseworkers, so the goal set by the caseworker became a powerful motivating factor in learning English.

“A positive thing that could be done might be a caseworker to go to meet a refugee and ask them about their past career. Are they looking to start something new, or whether they want to consider their old career. After they got this information they need to be clear about English. My worker said you need level 4. She made it clear to me. I studied hard to get to that. The resettlement officer stayed with us in every single step in our new life in [town name]

and was always giving us the best answers to our questions. She has played the key role in my successful journey of employment by giving me the right advice and guiding me to the place that I could get training from later on.”

Farid, 35, Syrian refugee living in Scotland

Key findings – English language

- Limited English language was the most often cited barrier to employment.
- Those who speak no English or who were only semi-literate struggled with immersive language learning.
- Participants would all welcome more English language support; both formal and informal learning plus learning tailored to specific employment pathways.
- Early advice which links a level of English attainment to a specific job pathway can be a powerful motivating factor to learn English.
- Depending on their career aspirations, refugees may have different ideas about the level of proficiency they need to reach in the English language before moving into a job.

HEALTH AND DISABILITY

A small number of participants had physical disabilities and some had minor health conditions prior to their resettlement to the UK, with none being referred for resettlement based on their medical concerns.²⁵ Whilst UNHCR asks refugees about any medical conditions and medical checks are completed before departure by IOM, in some cases, medical conditions will not be identified until after arrival in the country of resettlement.

Two participants in the assessment had been signed off work by their doctor in the UK, one for mental health reasons, the other for physical health reasons. One participant was well but had caring responsibilities for their spouse, who had a serious medical condition. A small number of

²⁵ The criteria for a resettlement referral under the Medical Needs Category requires that the refugee's condition is life threatening or very serious, that treatment is not available in the country of asylum and that there is a favorable prognosis with treatment in a country of resettlement.

participants highlighted the importance of finding jobs that were appropriate to their health issues and disabilities. One participant who was suffering from a physical condition (diagnosed after arrival in the UK) was encouraged into physical work which she said was inappropriate for her health condition and made it worse. As a result, she left the job after less than a week. Another was encouraged by volunteers in his local community to take up physical work which he was unable to do due to a disability.

Key Findings - Health and disability

- Refugees may have special needs which must be considered as they move into or towards particular jobs. This includes needs that may only become apparent after they are resettled in the UK.
- An assessment of care responsibilities and health status should be carried out when identifying appropriate employment for refugees.

PREVIOUS QUALIFICATIONS AND EXPERIENCE

Participants had a wide variety of previous qualifications and work experience before they came to the UK. Many participants hoped to use these qualifications and work again as lawyers, teachers, accountants, social workers, construction workers, civil engineers and dental technicians. However, none of the 14 participants was currently working in their original field. Of those who were working, some considered their current job a new path whilst others were working temporarily outside their field and developing additional skills or qualifications hoping to rejoin their old career.

The quality and availability of advice for participants about their previously held qualifications and how these translated in the UK varied widely. Many were surprised to learn after they arrived that their qualifications were not recognized, having heard overly positive impressions from friends, relatives or diaspora in the UK that it would be easy to find a job in their field when they arrived. Some had learned that it would take too long for their English to reach a regulated standard to pursue their old career or that additional training and certification was required. For many, this

meant disappointment and frustration with several participants describing feeling depressed about being unable to rejoin their field. This frustration was compounded for participants who had waited many months, or even years, in the UK to understand the non-transferability of their qualifications.

Indeed, the time it took participants to come to an understanding and acceptance of realistic career goals in the UK varied widely. Some had received clear advice in the first months of arrival about whether it was realistic to pursue their previous career, yet others were still unsure after several years. One striking example was a refugee with an engineering degree who ran a factory in Syria for more than a decade. After four years living in the UK, he had still not received clear information on whether his degree could be recognized here.

Two participants were unable to get their physical copies of their qualification certificates from their country of origin and explained that this meant these degrees could not be recognized at all in the UK. Whilst some participants had their qualifications assessed by the National Recognition Information Centre (NARIC), it was concerning to note that several participants who would have benefitted from a “Statement of Comparability” from NARIC had never heard of this opportunity or had only learned of it after being in the UK for several years.

National Academic Recognition Information Centre - NARIC

NARIC provides an official source of information on international education and training systems and wide-ranging international qualifications and skills attained from outside the UK. Refugees can seek a “Statement of Comparability” for the qualifications that they hold from the UK National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC).

<https://www.naric.org.uk/naric/>

One participant noted that he knew of many resettled refugees in the UK who were qualified electricians in their countries of origin. He was aware however that they had largely been advised by the Job Centre Plus (JCP) to give up on requalifying as electricians in the UK and instead find jobs

that did not require formal qualifications and lower levels of English. He suggested it may be better off, in the long run, to prioritize English for such individuals and try to unlock previous qualifications so as not to waste refugees' significant preexisting skills.

Case study

Samir's story

Samir is a refugee from Iraq, living in Scotland. He is an experienced engineer, now without work.

Samir was a qualified engineer in Iraq where he worked for a mining company for more than a decade. When his family fled Syria and sought asylum in Lebanon, he worked doing manual labour for several years. Since Samir and his family were resettled in the UK three years ago he has been unable to find paid work. Despite speaking some basic English before arriving Samir explains that he has found English study challenging and his lack of fluency holds him back in the job market. His engineering qualification is not fully recognized in the UK and he requires further study in the UK.

Recently Samir has done a security guard course, however, his accreditation has been significantly delayed because it is difficult for him to apply for a criminal record clearance from the time he was living in Lebanon as a refugee. Samir has enrolled in a masters' degree in engineering, a two-year course that will bring his qualification in line with the UK standard. He hopes to work as a security guard during his studies to support his family. He understands that the UK has different engineering accreditation standards but says he was shocked to learn that his extensive experience in Iraq was not recognized in the UK even though people in his engineering field are listed as being in specific demand on the UK Government's shortage occupation list.²⁶

Case study

Ahmed's story

Ahmed is a 51 years old refugee from Sudan living in North West

²⁶ UK Immigration Rules Appendix Shortage Occupation List, available at www.gov.uk/guidance/immigration-rules/immigration-rules-appendix-shortage-occupation-list

England. He is an experienced psychosocial support worker fluent in English without work.

Ahmed is a refugee from Sudan who resettled in the UK around 3 years ago. He has an honours degree in accounting from Sudan but spent many years in Egypt where he studied international negotiation and psychology and worked for over a decade providing psychosocial support and conducting community outreach with refugees. He spoke English before arriving in the UK, however, it took him almost a year to become comfortable understanding the accent in the city where he arrived.

In the first few months in the UK Ahmed was told he had good qualifications and should upload his CV online and make job applications for refugee support and accounting jobs which he did. However, after more than a year he received advice from a refugee support NGO that none of his accounting, psychology or international relations qualifications nor his previous experience would allow him to work at a similar level in the UK.

It was a very difficult realization for Ahmed that he would have to start again in entry-level roles in these areas, putting him more than a decade behind professionally. Even once he started applying for lower-level roles he was not chosen for these jobs, he believes because he was older than other candidates and did not have UK experience, despite having volunteered extensively with different refugee support NGOs in the UK. Friends told him he could apply for a job as a security guard, but he is passionate to continue work in his previous career supporting refugees.

After 3 years of trying to navigate the system in the UK, Ahmed has determined that his best chance of regaining his career is to enrol in a Master's degree related to his work with displaced people in Egypt.

Key Findings – previous qualifications

- No participants interviewed for the study were working in their previous field.
- Many refugees are waiting many months or even years to understand realistic career options, including whether they can utilize their previous degrees, qualifications and experience.
- Few participants had received specialized in-person advice about whether or how they could use their previous degrees or qualifications. It was important to many participants to receive in-person advice from someone they trusted especially when making

fraught decisions about whether to try and regain their previous profession or change careers.

- There may be common groupings of skills that refugees have (e.g. electricians, construction workers) that would benefit from specific programmes to help them convert their qualifications.
- Whilst some participants had their qualifications assessed by the National Recognition Information Centre (NARIC), others who would have benefitted from a “Statement of Comparability” from NARIC had never heard of this opportunity or had only learned of it after several years.

AGE

The age range of participants was between 29 and 51 years of age. Several older participants reflected on the challenges they faced applying for entry-level jobs or those often held by younger people. One participant was interested to work in hospitality and had applied for numerous jobs but believes these businesses were looking for younger staff. Another was interested to work in his field in jobs lower than his level of experience but said that his mature age was an issue for entry-level jobs, which would usually go to younger university graduates. Another participant was aware of specific recruitment drives from a major supermarket chain for unemployed people but noted that these opportunities were only for those 16-25.

Key Findings - age

- Older refugees may struggle to move into entry-level jobs which are traditionally held by younger people (for example some jobs in hospitality and supermarket cashiers).

LOCATION IN UK

Overall, there was no obvious pattern, from the sample of those who had found work at some point, of employment being higher in major cities (2 people) compared to towns (4 people). No participants expressed a strong desire to move within the UK for a job, however, a small number of participants identified that living in a more rural location in the UK (which

they do not get to choose)²⁷ may hurt their ability to find a job. For these participants, although they did not describe it as the main challenge, they thought that it would be easier to find jobs or open businesses in a major city. One participant, for example, had expressed an interest in opening a car-wash or oil-changing business. When he explored the idea with his council, they had advised that such an enterprise would not be possible in his small town but might work in a city. One participant who was at work enjoyed living in a smaller town where life was quieter, and he could focus on supporting his wife who has a health condition.

Key findings – location in the UK

- Some participants thought they may have more career options in larger cities; however, this was not cited as a major barrier by participants.

INFORMATION ABOUT UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFIT

A small number of participants explained that before or shortly after their arrival in the UK they had been informed by their community that they would be financially better off if they could remain on Government unemployment payments, rather than finding low paid work. Whilst all had subsequently identified that this was not true, they noted that some newcomers held this misbelief which presented a problematic disincentive to finding paid work, particularly entry-level jobs. One participant explained that the misinformation was easily addressed by sitting down with a community support group where he received simple information about the benefits system and a person explained to him that if he was working, even in an entry-level job, he would be better off financially than being on benefits. For those receiving government employment support they were quick to highlight that they did not enjoy being unemployed and being on benefits, that for them work meant more than financial gain; it meant contributing and feeling valued as a member of society.

One participant explained that he had worked a short time in a part-time job whilst on employment support, which he was unaware was wrong. As soon as he found out this was not allowed, he declared his working to the

²⁷ Refugees resettled under the UK's schemes are generally matched with local authorities based on the availability of suitable accommodation based on their assessed needs.

Job Centre and was made to pay a modest fine. The participant counted this as a valuable lesson in his integration experience.

Key findings – information about benefits

- Some participants were not initially provided with clear information on unemployment benefits. This may contribute to misinformation in communities and may disincentivize resettled refugees to look for early employment.

RACIAL BIAS & DISCRIMINATION

Two female participants said that wearing a hijab made it more difficult to find a job as they would be discriminated against by potential employers.²⁸ This was the conclusion they had reached after speaking with the Muslim community in the UK but also based on personal experience as both had faced incidents of racial abuse whilst on the street wearing hijab. One woman had recently decided to remove her hijab on the basis that it would be easier to find a job without it.

One participant had interviewed for a job as a supervisor in an organisation. The employer told him he may be interested in a more junior role, well below his experience. A friend had later told him that only white British people would get the supervisor position. The participant was not sure whether this was true and had not lodged any formal complaint about the recruitment process, but said this was the perception in his community; that it was more difficult for foreigners or non-white people to get particular jobs.

Key findings – racial bias & discrimination

- Some participants perceived that they may be discriminated against by potential employers due to their different cultural or religious backgrounds. This included female participants who felt like wearing hijab would make it more difficult for them to get a job, including one participant who had decided to stop wearing hijab for this reason.

²⁸ UNHCR has previously identified instances of racial abuse and harassment directed towards resettled refugee women in the UK. See *Safe and Stronger*, UNHCR, pg. 37, available at <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/5f2d47eb4.pdf>

DRIVING LICENSES

Several participants noted that driving jobs (taxis, delivery drivers etc.) would be a practical way for them to finding early employment, but such opportunities were obstructed by the difficulties in getting a license due to the level of English required for the test. Only their English language skills were holding them back from applying for a license. These participants felt frustrated as they held driving licenses in their home countries and could see paid work or small business opportunities as drivers.

For others, not having a license presented challenges because they could not drive to job opportunities which limited the pool of jobs they could consider. This issue was even more challenging for participants who lived in more rural areas which required long trips on public transport to particular workplaces.

Key findings – driving licenses

- The English language requirement for UK driving licenses presents a barrier to refugees seeking early employment in driving jobs and may also restrict the pool of jobs they can easily reach geographically.

LACK OF “UK EXPERIENCE”

Several participants reported being turned away from jobs because they did not have the required experience working in the UK. One participant, for example, tried to register with a home care agency, however, her application was significantly delayed because she was unable to provide references for people who knew her in the UK for the last five years, having only arrived more recently.

Others spoke of the challenges in learning UK work culture; the customs, habits and rules.

“Work culture [is different]. For example, in Syria, the secretary position that I worked in is different than here. I think in Syria it is easier, and here there are many rules, many rules. Because they are asking for experience and I am a new arrival, I don’t have

experience working here in England. If they don't give us a chance to get that experience, where can I get that?"

Fatima, 44, Syrian refugee, South West England

ADVICE, INFORMATION & PERSONALIZED EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT

One barrier to employment that cuts across those discussed above is a lack of access to clear information, which more than half of participants raised as an issue. Indeed, many participants had not received key pieces of information, some of it relatively basic, that would have put them on an earlier track to paid employment. Participants had not, for example, been provided with timely advice on how to apply for a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check, how to apply to NARIC for a qualifications transfer, information on whether their qualifications held any weight in the UK or how paid work would affect their welfare payments. Strikingly, some participants explained that they had not realized that there were employment support programmes provided by NGOs available to them, or had only been made aware of such programmes after many months or even years in the UK.

A lack of clear information had resulted in some participants relying on incorrect information from friends, relatives or the broader community, for example, some participants who were told incorrectly they would be better off financially on unemployment benefits than in paid work.

The assessment suggests that generic local authority caseworker and/or Job Centre support is insufficient to assist with finding employment. Whilst almost all participants spoke warmly of the reception and integration support provided by their local authority or NGO caseworkers, they explained that their caseworkers were generally either too busy supporting them and others with different integration issues to guide them towards an employment pathway or did not have the appropriate knowledge to direct them appropriately. The Government's funding instruction for LAs specifies that casework support should include assisting with access to employment,²⁹ however, it is entirely up to LAs to determine what form this support should take and UNHCR observed that for the most part the support was limited to referring participants to their

²⁹ UK Home Office, Funding Instruction for local authorities in the support of the United Kingdom's Resettlement Schemes, Financial Year 2020-2021, available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/877261/2020-2021_LA_Funding_Instruction_v1.0_-_Final1.pdf

local Job Centre Plus, which in most instances was insufficient (see Section 18 below). There were however important exceptions. One participant, for example, directly attributed his pathway into employment to the advice, guidance and support that he received from his local authority caseworker who motivated him to learn English and then found him an employability training course specific to his interests in IT at the local council.

“Great support I got from my resettlement officer [in the UK]. She put me on the right path. She knew “[Farid] is ready” and we should put him in training and he can build skills to look for a job in the future. The resettlement officer explained that to me and all the refugees here and she explained the right to live and work in Scotland. She said just start your English classes and once you are ready to work we will help you out. She was always pushing me.”

Farid, 35, Syrian refugee living in Scotland.

Whilst all participants suggested that individualized advice would improve their employment prospects, only four had been enrolled in or knew about any employment support programmes in their area. A further two had been supported by entrepreneurial support organizations. None of these programmes was specific to refugees. When asked about the value of these programmes, one participant explained that the support provided by the organization was too early as his English was too underdeveloped for any work. One had only just started in a programme. Another participant explained that his enrollment in a local Government employability programme was fundamental to his path to employment. It provided him with a staged programme of training relevant to his interests in developing his IT skills and eventually a work placement which in turn led to a full time IT position.

Others who had found work had done so through diaspora connections, dropping off CVs at local businesses and through the Job Centre Plus (as discussed below).

“Not all refugees are the same, some have high levels of education, some don’t know how to read or write in Arabic or English. Some need to continue with college, some need to start work. It’s very difficult to collect them in one job or to

make them start the same job. The advice has to be different for everyone. I think it's very difficult, not easy.”
Hassan, 40, Syrian refugee living in South West England

Whilst there are many programmes and organisations across the UK focussed on refugee employment, including casework support, UNHCR and others³⁰ have observed in other studies that the availability of employment support for refugees varies widely. Participants universally recommended improving individual casework support for employment as they suggested that early on, it would be useful to have someone who could point them in the direction of appropriate courses, mentoring and training opportunities and provide advice about realistic career prospects based on their specific background and accommodating their needs. They spoke of the importance of having trusted advisors helping them to set early goals to motivate them with English language learning, for example, advice on what level of English they would need for a specific training course. Many participants also spoke of how useful it would be to have a mentor to speak to within their field.

Case study

Farid's story

Farid is a 35 years old Syrian refugee who works in individualized casework support and specialised employability programmes.

Farid was an accountant working in Syria. When he and his family fled Syria, he continued working odd jobs in accounting before working with NGOs in a refugee camp for several years where he developed an interest in IT and coding. His family were referred for resettlement by UNHCR as survivors of violence and because someone in his family was suffering a long-term illness.

Farid spoke no English on arrival in the UK and was “pushed” by his resettlement caseworker to focus on getting his English to level 4 before she would enrol him in a local government training course. It took Farid 5 months to reach level 4 English after which his caseworker referred him to the course where he told his coach about his accountancy degree but also that he was interested in coding and IT. His coach suggested

³⁰ Tweed, A., & Stacey, S., *Refugee Employment Support in the UK: Insights into services, barriers, and best practice to support refugees into employment across the UK*, commissioned by the Refugee Employment Network, March 2018, <https://transitions-london.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Refugee-Employment-Support-2018.pdf> .

enrolling in a structured course that covered IT but also general public sector training in customer services. Farid spent several weeks training at a major multinational company before a work placement was found with his local council where he worked for 9 months. At the work placement, his manager helped him develop his skills incrementally while he finished an IT diploma.

A year after arriving in the UK and many interviews later Farid secured a job in IT with the local council. He has since moved up into a job as an IT analyst. He is currently working on big projects and can see career progression options. He enjoys this stability because he is supporting his family.

Key findings – Advice, information and personalized employment support

- Generic local authority caseworker and/or Job Centre support is usually insufficient to assist refugees with finding employment.
- Where local authorities provided employment support to resettled refugees this was often limited to referring participants to their local Job Centre Plus.³¹
- Many participants had not received key pieces of information, some of it relatively basic, that would have put them on an earlier track to paid employment.
- Few participants had accessed specialized employment support programmes.
- Many participants were unfamiliar with NARIC.
- Some participants faced challenges completing DBS checks due to issues in completing police checks in countries where they had lived as refugees before coming to the UK.
- Many participants spoke of how useful it would be to have a mentor to speak to within their field.

³¹ UK Home Office, Funding Instruction for local authorities in the support of the United Kingdom's Resettlement Schemes, Financial Year 2020-2021, available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/877261/2020-2021_LA_Funding_Instruction_v1.0_-_Final1.pdf

JOB CENTRE PLUS (JCP)



© UNHCR/Howard Davies
Refugee woman learns digital skills

Participants' experiences of support from the Job Centre Plus were mixed. Many felt like their attendance at the JCP was simply a mandatory requirement - a box-ticking exercise where they "signed on" rather than a place where they could get practical employment advice.

Whilst several participants found volunteering opportunities and developed their CVs through the JCP, participants did not usually associate this support with an improved likelihood that they would find a job.

Others raised concerns that their job coaches had provided them with information that wasn't correct. One participant who had a degree in applied chemistry and significant experience running factories was told by his job coach that there were no relevant factories in his area. The participant was disappointed to learn this, however sometime later he searched himself and found 11 chemical factories close to where he lived. He has now applied for jobs at several of the factories.

A minority of participants referred to the atmosphere at the Job Centre and their interactions with job coaches as stressful and negative. There were, however, some standout positive JCP experiences, which clearly

showed that meaningful engagement and support from JCP job coaches can be key to unlocking employment opportunities for refugees. One participant highlighted the positive difference it made once her job coach changed to someone who spent time understanding her background and situation as a refugee. She describes this in her own words below:

“First time at the Job Centre I felt uncomfortable, the first person [employee at the Job Centre] I saw who spoke Arabic who tried to assist said “Do that, don’t do that, this is the job centre you are in!” it made me nervous. When I went outside I felt like I was in an exam. I took a deep breath. It took a lot of my energy. After that, after 6 or 7 months when that person changed, the new coach at Job Centre is very kind and a beautiful person. Tried to help me find a course in [...] college. She is very kind, supportive, I had some problems in my house and she tries to help me even though it’s not her job. I miss her in the lockdown.”

Amira, 29, Syrian refugee living in the West Midlands

One participant in work as a heavy goods vehicle (HGV) driver, a job he finds fulfilling, was able to directly attribute his employment to support from his JCP coach. His coach spent time with him asking him about a range of jobs that might interest him. She was then able to link him up to a Government grant which would support him with HGV licensing training. The participant referred to his job coach by name and referred to her as a “friend”.

Key findings – JCP / DWP / Job coaches

- Meaningful engagement and support from JCP job coaches can be key to unlocking employment opportunities for refugees.
- The JCP can be a stressful and negative experience for refugees. Participants responded positively to job coaches who had taken the time to understand their situation and background as a refugee. This helped to make the JCP a less stressful experience.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Four participants had owned their own business in their country of origin before coming to the UK. One participant had received advice from an NGO to support him in setting up a small food business. The participants think the information he received was wrong and resulted in his business

application was refused by the local council. This left him frustrated that he was still paying back the cost of the van costs from the business start-up which was unable to go forward.

One participant noted that there were many small businesses (mostly restaurants and grocery stores) owned by Syrian families who had come to the UK 7-8 years ago, but that these took time to establish. The same participant aspired to start his own construction business. He had researched opening a small factory however had determined that he would be unable to borrow the required £15,000 he would need. Whilst he has conducted some of his research, he explained he would benefit from legal advice on dealing with a factory landlord, the tax system and how to import relevant machinery.

Key findings – Entrepreneurship

- Several participants were interested in starting a small business none had been able to source proper advice or capital to do so.

EXPECTATIONS & ASPIRATIONS

Participants were asked to reflect on the expectations they may have had about employment before they arrived in the UK and to compare these with what they found. All participants found the route to employment harder than they had envisaged before arriving, and most a great deal harder.

Participants had received information from friends and family, both in their country of asylum and diaspora already living in the UK, that it would be a short time before they learned English, did some volunteering and then moved into paid employment. Some participants said that the cultural orientation material provided to them before departing to the UK suggested that it would be easier to find a job than it really was. This included a small number of participants who felt that the information they were provided on employment before arriving was deliberately hopeful to “cheer them up” as they may be worried about resettling in the UK

Although participants had these concerns, all were grateful for the welcome and support they had received, and none expressed a view that they would not have come to the UK had they known of the challenges in finding employment. Nonetheless, participants pointed out that more realistic information provided to them before travelling would help them to

think through possible options for a new career or regaining their old one, to mentally prepare for the changes ahead.

Key findings – Expectations and aspirations

- All participants found the route to employment harder than they had envisaged before arriving, and most a great deal harder.

USE OF THE WAITING TIME FOR RESETTLEMENT

After UNHCR identifies and refers their cases for resettlement, refugees must wait several months and sometimes longer than a year before they are accepted, complete relevant medical and security checks travel on resettlement to the UK. Many participants noted that this time could be more productively used if they could be provided with English language classes and any training that might make their route to employment easier once they reached the UK.

“Maybe during these 8 months, if they give us language courses to whatever country we are going to, it would be useful to take a simple course to know the language because it was a shock to us when we arrived.”

Walid, 42, Syrian refugee resettled from Turkey now living in Northern Ireland.

One participant who had himself worked with refugee communities noted that refugees would have different preparation needs which could be catered for during the waiting time. For example, those who had been living in refugee camps for many years may face more difficulties with cultural adjustment to the UK and may benefit from additional cultural orientation before arrival. Those living in urban environments may need less of this type of training but could benefit from English language or other employability support. Some participants did note that any additional training available during the waiting time for resettlement would need to consider that many refugees will be working long hours to sustain their family in the country of asylum and so may not have the capacity to undertake long courses if they are not financially supported to do so.

Key findings – Using the resettlement process waiting period

- Many participants felt that the waiting period for resettlement could be more productively used if they could be provided with the English language and/or employability support which may be relevant to employment in the UK.

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The assessment was conducted from June to September 2020, several months into the COVID-19 pandemic. The associated upheaval in the country had naturally impacted the lives of all participants and whilst the assessment was not focused on the pandemic, its impact could not be ignored.

Many participants noted that their English learning had suffered because classes had either been suspended for a time and then moved online, which were viewed as suboptimal.

Positively, the five participants who had been working since before the pandemic had managed to keep their jobs despite the economic impact of the pandemic, with four participants continuing work and one participant being furloughed for 3 months. One participant felt pleased to be able to contribute by continuing to work as part of the supply chain for food and other necessities during the pandemic.

Unsurprisingly, those looking for work before the pandemic now found their job search much more challenging especially as a number of participants had been looking at possibilities in hospitality, a sector badly affected by the pandemic. With JCP centres closed, some applicants were concerned that they were missing out on referrals training or job opportunities.

Key findings – Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

- Refugees may be disproportionately affected by the pandemic in developing their employability due to the suspension of English or employability training classes and/or the move to online learning.

- Refugees looking for entry-level jobs in hospitality may be disproportionately affected by the pandemic given the impact of the pandemic on the hospitality sector.³²

CASE STUDY

Amira's story

Amira is a 29 years old Syrian refugee living in the West Midlands. She started a positive initiative during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Several weeks into the COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020, Amira started receiving messages from parents in her community explaining that they were struggling to teach their children at home because their English was limited. Recognizing that her English was better than others and have developed strategies for supporting her children with school at home, Amira developed an online education support group within the Syrian community. The group supports other resettled refugee families who are struggling to educate their children at home. Amira particularly enjoyed building this network as she is passionate to pursue teaching in the future, even if her ultimate teaching goal is rather different; to teach civil engineering (her profession) in university.

FINDINGS FROM PREVIOUS ASSESSMENT WITH RESETTLED WOMEN

This assessment builds on employment-related data and analysis from *Safer and Stronger*,³³ UNHCR's much larger 2019 participatory assessment with resettled women (women's assessment). For this reason, only three of the 14 participants in the present assessment were women. Key findings from the previous women's assessment are summarised in the box below.

³² Other research has shown that hospitality is one of the more common skillsets for refugees in the UK (including refugees recognized through the asylum system). See Gibb, C., *Effective Partnerships: A report on engaging employers to improve refugee employment in the UK*, 2018, <https://refugeeemploymentnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Effective-Partnerships-A-report-on-engaging-employers-to-improve-refugee-employment-by-Charlotte-Gibb.pdf>

³³ UNHCR, 2020, *Safer and Stronger; Experiences of Refugee Women Resettled to the UK*, <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/5f2d47eb4.pdf>

Key findings – UNHCR’s previous assessment with resettled women³⁴

- Although very few women were in paid employment, participants were keen to contribute to society in the future through work and employment opportunities, which allow them to share their culture with their local communities. Only three of the 143 women interviewed in the focus groups were working in full or part-time paid employment in the UK: one as a care worker; one as a barista; and one as an interpreter. Two of those in employment spoke English before arriving in the UK.
- Most of those not in paid work would not be considered unemployed as they were not yet looking for paid work. Participants cited unpaid care work (looking after their families including young children), limited English language or the fact they had only been in the UK for a short time as reasons why they were not yet looking for work. Most women wanted to enter paid work once their children were older or once they had improved their English language skills.
- Some of the participants had worked in their country of origin and, usually informally, in their country of asylum, in jobs such as hairdressing, hospitality, housekeeping and teaching. All had been living in the UK for over two years.
- Several of the women were volunteering in a wide range of organisations such as churches, museums, charity shops and food banks. They had been helped to do so by their caseworkers and found this a very positive practice.
- Some women felt that they were being pushed into work by Job Centre staff before they were ready and felt that Job Centre staff were suggesting inappropriate initiatives for them such as employment programmes, which require computer literacy.

In terms of good practice, the women’s assessment found that women with childcare responsibilities or living in rural locations far from their ESOL class were greatly aided by initiatives that allowed remote learning through online classes and the provision of tablets. Some women in the study spoke highly of a museum volunteering programme had taken part

³⁴ Ibid

in which they said helped with learning English, preparation for work and their integration with the local community.

A key recommendation from the women's assessment was that Job Centre Plus centres should ensure that staff receive specific training on the needs of refugees in general and refugee women in particular. Training should be provided from age, gender and diversity perspectives and should set up review mechanisms to ensure that these needs are considered when recommending initiatives for them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

English

The Home Office, Department for Education and local authorities should

- Expand English language learning opportunities - both formal and informal, including community conversation classes
- Develop/improve English language learning for refugees with limited literacy ('pre-entry' level). This may include exploring the possibility of delivering ESOL classes in the UK in both English and a refugee's first language.
- Further assess the impact of the pandemic on the delivery of English language classes for refugees, the efficacy of online tuition/resources and consider the provision of more intensive learning once social distancing guidelines allow (to make up for lost time).

The Home Office and Department for Work and Pensions should

- Continue work with employers to provide more opportunities to learn English on the job

The Home Office should

- Explore options for language provision in countries of asylum while refugees are waiting for their resettlement departure to the UK

Job Centre

The Department for Work and Pensions should

- Provide training for job coaches to understand refugees' particular experiences and needs and ensure a welcoming environment. This should include a more thorough consideration of previous experience and tailored advice considering the gaps refugees have in their CVs and the particular challenges they face in having their qualifications recognized in the UK
- Training should also include a particular focus on the situation for refugee women and be provided from an age, gender and diversity perspective with review mechanisms to ensure that these needs are taken into account when recommending initiatives for them.

Previous qualifications and experience

The Home Office, Department for Work and Pensions and local authorities should

- Map refugees' skills and experience in the UK to explore whether there may be common skills cohorts that could benefit from targeted support from Government and the private sector
- Advise refugees as early as possible about the potential to have their qualifications assessed by NARIC
- Ensure clear guidance and support for refugees requesting criminal record/police checks from countries where they have previously lived

Age

The Home Office, Department for Work and Pensions and local authorities should

- Explore targeted employment support for older refugees who may find it harder to move into entry-level roles

Casework support

The Home Office, Department for Work and Pensions and local authorities should

- Improve access for refugees to individual casework support for employment and employability
- Disseminate good practise and guidance on employability programmes to local authorities supporting resettlement to ensure the most efficient use of the central government tariff for resettlement cases

Engagement with businesses

The Home Office, Department for Work and Pensions and local authorities should

- Continue to engage businesses in refugee employment initiatives, including through the Refugee Employment Network

Racial bias / Discrimination

UK employers should

- Consider the recommendations in UNHCR's guide for employers³⁵ which provide detailed advice on becoming a refugee-friendly employer and how to tap into the great potential refugees have to offer as employees.

Driving license

The Home Office, Department for Education and local authorities should

- Provide English language support tailored for refugees wanting to complete their driving test

Entrepreneurship

The Home Office should

- Continue support for refugee entrepreneurship, and ensure programmes include backstop support for those whose businesses do not succeed or are slow to succeed.

Expectations and aspirations

The Home Office should

- Review pre-departure cultural orientation materials to ensure that a realistic picture is painted of employment pathways in the UK

Using the pre-departure waiting period

The Home Office should

- Explore options for providing refugees with the English language and/or employability support while they wait for resettlement to the UK. At a minimum, this could include formally recommending relevant free online language classes to those waiting.

³⁵ UNHCR, UK Home Office, DWP, BITC and IOM, *Tapping Potential: Guidelines to Help British Businesses Employ Refugees*, April 2019, available from www.unhcr.org/5cc9c7ed4.