



University of
Southampton



Creating pathways to work

Supporting newly arrived refugees
overcome barriers to work in the UK

Background

The programme supported:

**22 refugees
9 men and
13 women**

Refugees bring valuable skills, experience and motivation to the UK labour market, but often face structural and practical challenges when seeking work. This policy brief draws on an evaluation of The Refugee Employment Support Programme (RESP) in Oxford, from June 2023 to August 2024, funded by Oxford City Council and delivered by a partnership of four voluntary-sector organisations.

The programme offered intensive person-centred employment support for refugees who had been resettled to the UK. It supported people who had experienced substantial challenges and barriers in finding sustainable employment after several years of being in the UK.

Resettled refugees are people who have been relocated to the UK from another country where they sought protection from persecution. The refugees in this study came under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme or Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme and many had specialised health needs.

The programme supported 22 refugees: 9 men and 13 women. It offered a package of individually tailored support provisions which included employability support, English classes, work-based ESOL classes,

mentoring, skills training courses, support accessing education, small grants for employment related costs, and social inclusion activities. The programme also offered trauma-informed training workshops for employers and set up site visits for refugees. Support was grounded in understanding that wider settlement needs can impact refugees' lives and their journey into work.

The evaluation was undertaken using a mix of qualitative research methods, including in-depth interviews with RESP participants and service providers, and document analysis of participant data and project documentation.

This policy brief outlines recommendations for approaches to supporting refugees in overcoming barriers to work. The findings may be most relevant to newly resettled refugees, those recently granted refugee status or other newly arrived groups who have sought protection and are looking for work. While this research was based in Oxford, the findings and recommendations are widely applicable to employment support for refugees in the UK (and elsewhere).

Findings

Refugees come to the UK with a broad range of valuable skills, knowledge and experiences that will enrich UK society.

Most refugees had professions and careers before being forced to flee, and many are well-educated.

Early, targeted support can help them understand unfamiliar systems, access opportunities and overcome the significant barriers they face in finding employment. This is an important investment because the contribution refugees can offer to the UK workforce and economy is immense. Although refugees are a diverse group, the evaluation identified common challenges that many refugees (and migrants) face on arrival in the UK.

Barriers to work

Preparing for work

- Unfamiliarity with UK rules, regulations and systems, e.g., tax and welfare support.
- Limited understanding of the UK labour market, including available jobs and entry requirements.
- English language barriers, and insufficient free English language classes available locally.
- Demands associated with settlement processes, e.g., accessing healthcare, securing housing, finding schools.
- Demands of childcare and domestic responsibilities, including lack of affordable childcare.

Looking for work

- Lack of recognition of their existing skills, experience, and qualifications gained outside the UK.
- Unfamiliarity with formal job application processes, often experienced as overly complex.
- Demoralising experiences arising from barriers to returning to previous professions and low success rates in job applications.
- Stressful interactions with the Jobcentre and confusing requirements and processes.

In work

- Unfamiliarity with employment processes and expectations in the UK.
- Lack of awareness of employment rights.
- Precarious and/or informal working situations.
- Unfamiliarity with complex, formal processes for setting up a business in the UK.
- Lack of funding for business start-up.

Recommendations

for employment support for refugees

Preparing for work

- UK systems and regulations around work need to be explained clearly and in-depth by support services when people first arrive and on an ongoing basis.
- Refugees need advice and guidance around opportunities for work e.g., about local labour markets, entry routes, and career options. This is best delivered through individual casework models of support that encompass career advice and practical support in looking for work.
- It is important to encourage aspirations and to consider the quality and appropriateness of jobs that support progression into sustainable employment, and the balancing of family/caring responsibilities with paid work.
- Employment programmes should assess individuals' English language needs at the start of engagement with support and prioritise learning opportunities. This could include individual and/or group classes and learning English for work (e.g., vocabulary for specific employment sectors). Improving language skills can broaden work aspirations and help individuals to gain jobs that match their skills and experience, rather than being limited to insecure, entry-level jobs.
- Employment programmes need to be aware of refugees' wider settlement needs, such as around housing, welfare benefits and health support. Mental health and trauma are crucial dimensions to consider, including past trauma and continuing anxiety over separation from family members. Offering holistic support packages and working with partners can help address these needs. Stabilising health issues may need to be prioritised before efforts can focus on employment.
- Employment programmes can facilitate discussions about how work will impact domestic and childcare responsibilities. Ongoing conversations, rather than one-off assessments of readiness for work, will take better account of situations and priorities changing over time.

Looking for work



Figure 1: Support with applying for jobs

- In-depth support is needed navigating job application processes in the UK and with setting expectations and providing reassurance around the normalcy of rejection and repeated applications. Figure 1 illustrates examples of support.
- It is important to identify individuals' skill development, training, education, and work experience needs, alongside local opportunities to meet them. Employment programmes can help secure initial work experience, for example through volunteering or entry-level roles, and can provide, or source, relevant training to build the skills and knowledge needed for employment or business development. They can also support individuals to plan for longer-term career goals.
- The relationship between employment programmes and local Jobcentres is important in fostering mutual understanding of personal circumstances and the requirements of Universal Credit. Insights from programme learning, such as the barriers to work for refugees, can be shared with Jobcentres to enhance practice.
- Working with local employers can support the development of inclusive recruitment practices and increase employers' awareness of the barriers refugees face in finding employment. This could include offering training courses for employers and setting up work experience placements for refugees.



In-work support

- Refugees may need advice around employment rights and advocacy support in communications with employers. Employment programmes should facilitate honest conversations (without fear of reprisal) about informal and precarious employment, so that refugees know their rights and are able to make informed decisions.
- Accessible specialist advice and support in self-employment and business start-up is needed, providing step-by-step guidance through the processes. This includes tax requirements, insurance, company registration and health and safety regulations.

Delivery models

- Employment support for refugees is best delivered through a multi-dimensional approach, that incorporates employability support, English language learning, and training and skill development opportunities. Additional support can include small grants for refugees for employment, business or training costs; access to specialist settlement advice services; and social activities.

- A person-centred approach is crucial, which includes ongoing assessment of each person's needs and aspirations, leading to the creation of individualised support plans. Trained volunteers providing regular one-to-one mentoring is an effective way to deliver tailored support.
- A medium to long-term approach to support is the most conducive to achieving lasting positive outcomes, as it can accommodate setbacks and changing circumstances and enhance relationship building.
- 'Soft' outcomes such as personal/skills development and increased confidence and well-being are a key part of the journey into employment, alongside 'hard' outcomes such as completing a training course or getting a job.

The findings from this research show that refugees are highly motivated to enter work but often require initial support to do so successfully. Early and effective employment support can help newly arrived refugees secure roles that make use of their skills, knowledge and experience, support career development, and facilitate their meaningful contribution to the UK economy.



Case study

Ali joined the Refugee Employment Support Programme eager to find work but he was having difficulty due to his limited English. Recognising that language barriers and the formality of application processes were affecting his confidence, the team provided intensive, tailored support.

Ali received weekly English lessons and mentoring support, and substantial help with applying for jobs. He also attended several training courses and visits to local employers.

By the end of the programme, Ali had improved his English, significantly increased his confidence, and secured his first paid job in the UK.

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You can find more information at: <https://www.oxford.gov.uk/migrants-refugees-asylum-seekers/accessing-employment>

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