# Supporting highly-skilled refugees into employment:

# *A guide for* *professional bodies*

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### December 2022

## Background

Refugees may be highly qualified and experienced professionals, yet many remain unemployed or under employed, in a lower-grade occupation than their skills merit. This has consequences for these individuals, including loss of earnings and loss of identity and self-worth, but also for the UK economy where there are many areas of skills shortage. Mainstream employment and refugee support organisations lack the specialised knowledge to help these individuals, knowledge which is the basis of professional bodies and their members.

This project sought to produce a research-informed review of the policies and activities of professional bodies to support refugees into employment in their disciplines, to understand current issues, barriers, and provision, and to provide recommendations to assist professional bodies in developing their practice. Three approaches were taken:

* A scoping review of global literature on highly skilled migrants, and professional bodies
* A review of websites and relevant activities of a sample of professional bodies in the UK to evaluate some of the support currently available
* Interviews and discussions with key informants, including professional body representatives and related organisations, refugee and employment support organisations, and refugees with a professional background themselves

With a few exceptions, the literature is largely blind to the potential role of professional bodies other than as institutions accrediting qualifications where they are a regulator. They are not represented as having the capacity through their operations and members to be agents for change.

In the UK, many were *“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.”* (UNHCR 2021, pp.28-29)

There is a huge diversity of professional bodies in the UK, with, to an outsider, a confusing array of names, terminology, roles, powers, relationships, degrees of specialism, and geographical reach. While some may recognise refugees as potential client groups, few professional bodies acknowledge that there are those with the skills or capacity to work in their profession, and even fewer provide clear and accessible support for those wishing to do so. There are consistently recurring support needs identified, and much goodwill and willingness to help. There are some areas of good practice, innovation, and partnerships in the health, IT and engineering sectors which could be used as models and developed.

The full research report is available [here](https://doc-00-bk-apps-viewer.googleusercontent.com/viewer/secure/pdf/vdclvnrc6ml07g28c0a30ie5dsb9ng14/luar7mkau4654lhi9rls20a6po3icmg6/1671643575000/gmail/12718590146104901621/ACFrOgDL6U1DJvITXUlH8nydQk-XwYTIaTt3EaLE7VlC6Dct5Jdo-XiycCcOXX-A-Su_FAgpZa0iEAv6FF1Slx4jvBWjEZ7ys5e49u7X-J-Nd7V2QcbXNe4tOVBtWZk=?print=true&nonce=7o3c6hp3eug6i&user=12718590146104901621&hash=tvpf53u8jvq470dflu7fi3hvl4ng27rc) and the findings have informed this guide to the issues faced by highly skilled refugees, and the practical ways in which professional bodies could further support them into work.

Recognition of the issues and ways they can help

Professional bodies (understood in its widest sense to cover the diversity of organisations) are understandably focused on their discipline and practice, supporting members, promoting the profession, and for some, regulating standards. There may be initiatives to promote equality, diversity, and inclusion more broadly, including for schoolchildren or under-represented groups. But few seem aware of the presence and needs of highly skilled refugees in the UK population and how they might be supported to enter the profession.

*“a range of other professional bodies could be doing an awful lot more for this untapped work force than they are doing already.”* (Archer et al 2005, p. 51)

*“refugees find it difficult to find employment and those that do are often employed in low-skilled jobs that may not reflect their professional backgrounds.” (*All Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees 2017, p.31)

In general refugees lack early access to appropriate language support, access to high quality information, advice and guidance (IAG) and professional networks, recognition of qualifications and skills assessment, high quality mentoring, job search assistance, CV and interview preparation, and volunteering or work placement opportunities. You, as their fellow professionals, can help facilitate all of this.

Outreach to Refugee Support Organisations

Knowledge of the circumstances of refugees, such as legal status and employment entitlements is potentially confusing. The barriers they face, and best practice in supporting them will not be known to many working in the professions. There are a wide range of national and local agencies with expertise listed below in this guide who will be able to offer guidance and support, and could develop a partnership.

Proactive approach

Organisations should be active in their efforts, rather than considering that they have processes in place if contacted. As well as (possibly) an institution which can accredit skills and qualifications if applicants meet the criteria, a professional body is an organisation comprising members (and via them, employers) who by definition have the skillsets, workplace knowledge, networks, and experience to help those in need.

Many good examples of supported individuals exist, but these are often by chance or through a personal contact, and so not widely available to all.

Embed and mainstream support

Many projects and initiatives falter when people change or project funding ends. Work needs to be embedded within the organisation so there is continuity. Include it as part of an Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) strategy and monitoring, with reports to the Board of Trustees or members as appropriate.

*“The agreement* [with the professional body] *was that the financial support would be provided, and then you have a person changes, somebody else comes in, you start the whole process all over again ... Not for a Lack of wanting to have it, it just kind of fizzles.”* Refugee Support Organisation

Work with related professional bodies, umbrella organisations and networks to share practice, maybe via organisations such as the Professional Association Research Network ([**PARN**](https://www.parnglobal.com/Public/Default.aspx)) as forum to exchange ideas and develop initiatives.

In Ireland *“there has been little or no opportunity for cross-collaboration between professional bodies to facilitate the sharing of good, innovative practices.”* (Ní Mhurchú 2007, p.10)

## Clear and accessible information, advice and guidance

Websites

These are likely to be the first point of contact for information and advice, and best practice would include:

**Case study: British Medical Association**

The BMA has links on the home page for doctors [New to the UK](https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/international-doctors) which then has specific [Help for refugee doctors](https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/international-doctors/getting-a-job-in-the-uk/help-for-refugee-doctors), which includes a form to join the

**BMA refugee doctor initiative**

The refugee doctor initiative is free and provides you with a range of benefits to help suitably trained doctors to get their licence to practice in the UK.

**What is included**

* Free weekly subscription to [the BMJ](http://bmj.com/).
* A confidential, 24-hour phone [counselling service](https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/your-wellbeing/wellbeing-support-services/counselling-and-peer-support-services) for you and your family for all personal, emotional, work or study related problems.
* Use of the BMA library.
* Local BMA support and attendance of local BMA meetings.
* Support from the BMA international department.

There is also support from the [General Medical Council](https://www.gmc-uk.org/registration-and-licensing/join-the-register/before-you-apply/help-for-refugee-doctors)

* Appropriate links should be clearly on the homepage or easily discoverable
* Have information and associated language as specific as possible (so explicitly mention refugees or those with overseas qualifications), rather than just general ‘entering the profession’. Many organisations have this to e.g. encourage schoolchildren or support teachers, but refugees who have already been in the profession will require something different
* Have a contact person and email address for enquiries – which works and gets a reply!
* Ensure information valuable to users is comprehensive and not in members-only areas

Simple guide to the profession

How does the profession ‘work’ in the UK? What would not be clear and obvious to an ‘outsider’ even if qualified and experienced?

The information should be clear about any regulatory role, including explanation of why membership or accreditation is important or valuable. What are the processes required to be able to practice, and how can your organisation help? There may be members with refugee or other migrant backgrounds who are willing to provide lived experience and guidance for the organisation.

If there are different regulatory and professional bodies, or a range of similar alternative bodies then provide a guide to the differences. There may not be professional bodies in the refugees’ country of origin, or one may cover a range of disciplines with separate organisations in the UK.

*“In my country of origin there is no distinction between barrister and solicitor.”* Refugee lawyer

*“There is no professional body in my country.”* Refugee civil engineer

Clear to both refugees and those supporting them

Information may be sought by refugee professionals themselves, or by ‘non-expert’ people working for refugee support organisations or in a mentoring or buddying scheme to help their service users. Information needs to be accessible and clear to both these groups, using plain English and with terms explained.

### ***Gendered issues***

While all refugees face barriers to employment, and different individuals will have diverse experiences, the evidence suggests there is a particular problem for professional women in (re)establishing their careers, even if they participate in general support programmes. So sensitivity to this and tailored support may be needed.

Inclusive & ‘can do’

Adopt an encouraging and inclusive tone, rather than just a list of all the things they need to do to enter the profession, which can seem daunting and unattainable.

Do you have members who are from a refugee background, or have you supported people previously? Case studies and success stories on the website are encouraging, and accompanying videos can be more engaging and more accessible than just text.

While refugees may have experienced trauma, most report that their biggest frustration is with bureaucracy and delays in returning to the career they love which gives them identity and sense of purpose, as well as income and a sense of giving back to the country that has given them shelter. They can lose confidence and self-worth over time, so early positive interventions can provide a real boost.

Adopt a flexible approach to support, based on individual needs analysis, rather than a single ‘one size fits all’ package.

Alternate career pathways

Not all refugees will be able to continue in their previous career if the obstacles for them personally are too great, and some will be interested in a career change. Information and support for what alternative roles they might consider in the wider sector or beyond given their skills will be valuable.

## Qualifications

Accreditation

Provide clear and accessible pathways to recognising qualifications. Refugees may not have all their certificates and transcripts with them, or be able to get them. Consider qualification equivalence, and processes for recognising prior experience and learning (RPEL). Provide benchmarking where they are in their career to assist employers, and skills-based assessments, not just mapping certificates.

*“the respondents in our study were not distressed because Canadian employers did not accept their credentials immediately and without serious and prolonged scrutiny; rather, they were distressed because they did not know the path to take to overcome the credentialing problems that they faced*.” (Grant & Nadin 2007, p.159)

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| ENIC-NARIC produced a guide on best practice to [Recognise qualifications held by refugees – guide for credential evaluators](https://www.enic-naric.net/page-recognise-qualifications-refugees). It is particularly aimed at education institutions and employers, but has information and links which may be useful for professional bodies looking to develop their processes. | A [Toolkit for Recognition of Refugees’ Qualifications](https://www.nokut.no/globalassets/nokut/artikkelbibliotek/utenlandsk_utdanning/veiledere/toolkit_for_recognition_of_refugees_qualifications.pdf) has been developed by [NOKUT](https://www.nokut.no/en/) in collaboration with agencies across the EU. It is intended as a practical and easy-to-use inventory of tools and recommendations for credential evaluators and other professionals involved with evaluating the qualifications held by refugees. |

Fee waivers

The cost of registration or accreditation can be prohibitive to many refugees, so fee waivers would remove this significant barrier. Even if there are schemes to refund payments, the initial outlay can be a problem.

*“During our visit to Bristol, a number of refugees, including Amina and Mohammed who were both medical professionals, told us of their frustration at not having their previous qualifications recognised in the UK.”* (All Party Parliamentary Group on refugees 2017,p.31)

Free membership would be ideal, with full access to the range of support. They are likely to become full members when working!

Early support

Skills are devalued and lost without practice. Even if individuals are not immediately ready for the UK workplace, being clear about precisely what is required, and how they can get there will prevent significant wastage. Provide appropriate support early, rather than when they have achieved other targets such as qualifications or language proficiency.

## Experience

Mentoring / coaching scheme

Two people looking at a computer

Description automatically generated with low confidenceMany people across the UK volunteer to mentor or buddy refugees as part of schemes run by refugee support organisations, and it can be a hugely rewarding experience.

Matching people is extremely beneficial but subject to chance and so ad hoc. UK professionals will know the sector, and be able to help with work-specific English language support, where to look for jobs, and expectations for application forms, CVs and interviews.

Develop a scheme for members, calling for those willing to act as a specialised mentor to an individual. Maintain a volunteer database, including information such as specialist subject areas, geographic location (for people wishing to meet in person) and language skills or previous experience if they themselves are a migrant.

*“Lack of UK work experience, and, specifically, paid work experience were also seen as barriers, as were a lack of networks, specifically, professional networks.”* (Tweed & Stacey 2018, p.20)

Reach out to refugee support organisations who are familiar with mentoring schemes and can offer training or partnership work.

Access to events and support

Allow refugees to attend appropriate events, meetings and workshops organised by the profession. Publicise them via refugee support organisations who will be able to reach out to service users.

*“candidates have always said to us that's one of the things that they want … to meet fellow professionals and we will never be able to provide that, and the insight that those professionals in those sectors can provide directly to our clients. So we're really keen to continue to do that.”* Refugee Employment Support Organisation

Refugees often have little choice in where they live, and those outside large metropolitan areas may not have local support or capacity to travel easily. Online provision and resources can be very beneficial.

Engage employers

Placements and work shadowing opportunities are extremely important as an entry to the UK workplace and professional culture. Members are employees and can engage their employers, with advocacy and support by the professional body, to participate and potentially gain valuable skills. The NHS has long been engaged with health professionals, but there are other innovative approaches to match employers and refugees for IT professionals with [**PAZ**](https://www.paz.ai/) , and construction and engineering professionals with [**Renaisi**](https://renaisi.com/transitions/).

Volunteering and placements with the professional body

A role within the professional body, such as administrative support, shadowing, and the opportunity to look at applications and attend events would help develop knowledge of the profession and language.

## Sources of advice

Strategic Migration Partnerships (SMPs) are Local Government led partnerships funded by, but independent of, the Home Office. They facilitate and enable collaboration between central and local government, civil society, and regional and local stakeholders, as well as coordinating and supporting delivery of national and regional asylum and refugee programmes. There are 12 SMP partnerships across England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland.

Because of their strategic role, SMPs will have expert knowledge and links to specialist organisations and projects in their region and beyond, so are a key source of advice and information.

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|  | **Website links**  [**Scotland**](https://www.migrationscotland.org.uk/)  [**North East**](https://www.nemp.org.uk/)  [**Northern Ireland**](https://www.nilga.org/nilga-networks/strategic-migration-partnership)  [**North West**](https://northwestrsmp.org.uk/)  [**Yorkshire**](https://www.migrationyorkshire.org.uk/)  [**East Midlands**](https://www.emcouncils.gov.uk/Migration-Hub)  [**Wales**](https://www.wlga.wales/wales-strategic-migration-partnership)  [**West Midlands**](https://www.wmsmp.org.uk/)  [**East of England**](https://smp.eelga.gov.uk/)  [**London**](https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/communities-and-social-justice/migrants-and-refugees/london-strategic-migration-partnership-lsmp)and its wider programme for[**migrants and refugees**](https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/communities-and-social-justice/migrants-and-refugees)  [**South East**](https://southeastspm.org.uk/)  [**South West**](https://swcouncils.gov.uk/policy-strategy/policy-swsmp/) |

## Support for employment issues

This is not a guide to employing refugees, but there can understandably be uncertainty about status and rights, best practice, and questions about employing refugees which could be relevant to professional bodies working with employers and developing their offer. A number of general employment guides have been produced, including:

OECD and UNHCR (2018) [Engaging with Employers in the Hiring of Refugees: a 10-point multi-stakeholder action plan for employers, refugees, governments and civil society](https://eur02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.oecd.org%2Fels%2Fmig%2FUNHCR-OECD-Engaging-with-employers-in-the-hiring-of-refugees.pdf&data=05%7C01%7CJ.Willott%40leedsbeckett.ac.uk%7C94d19e93936446410be308dadd1babfd%7Cd79a81124fbe417aa112cd0fb490d85c%7C0%7C0%7C638065409430831250%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=JCY3jcRiSnq2lAwC0h8pWoW9%2FrAHAP%2F0ATgktmnnW50%3D&reserved=0).

UNHCR (2019) [Guidelines to Help British Businesses Employ Refugees](https://eur02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.unhcr.org%2F5cc9c7ed4&data=05%7C01%7CJ.Willott%40leedsbeckett.ac.uk%7C94d19e93936446410be308dadd1babfd%7Cd79a81124fbe417aa112cd0fb490d85c%7C0%7C0%7C638065409430675013%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=73Y8EF%2BaQZFeNS%2FMj9pW7MAu%2BnFc2UH2JHH9e73X6fI%3D&reserved=0)

[The Tent Partnership for Refugees](https://www.tent.org/) is a non-profit organization launched in 2016 to mobilize the global business community to include refugees. It is now a global network of over 300 major companies committed to integrating refugees in their host communities. Working with [Breaking Barriers](https://breaking-barriers.co.uk/) it has produced a [U.K. Employers’ Guide to Hiring Refugees](https://www.tent.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Tent_Guidebook_UK_singlepages.pdf), a practical toolkit intended to help employers who are interested in hiring refugees in the United Kingdom. The guide is intended to help companies design and implement refugee employment programs that will be maximally successful for employers and refugees alike. It contains essential information related to refugee recruitment and employment, including:

* Information on refugee populations in the United Kingdom
* The business benefits of hiring refugees
* Best practices for recruiting refugee employees
* Common barriers – and solutions – to refugee hiring and integration
* Case studies from companies hiring refugees in the United Kingdom

If you read any of these you will observe that none of them explicitly recognise a role for professional bodies in specialised employment support, so the need for mainstreaming activities advocated in this guide are evident!

It would also be worth contacting your regional Strategic Migration Partnership for advice and referral, as they usually have employment schemes as part of their activities, or one of the organisations working with highly-skilled refugees.

## Organisations supporting skilled refugee employment

There have been many short-lived or regional projects to support particular groups, or organisations and projects which have supported highly skilled people as part of other work. Organisations and initiatives here are more focused or long term, and may be useful points of contact for professional bodies seeking advice or partnerships.

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|  | [**Refugee Employment Network (REN)**](https://refugeeemploymentnetwork.co.uk/) is a charity “that ensures that refugees in the UK can access appropriate, fulfilling, paid employment or self-employment.” |
|  | [**REFUAID**](https://refuaid.org/) aims to “support access to language tuition, education, finance and meaningful employment.” |
|  | [**Refugees & Mentors**](https://refmentors.org.uk/)  supports people seeking asylum, refugees and vulnerable migrants to improve their employment prospects and get jobs. Based in Manchester. |
|  | [**PAZ**](https://www.paz.ai/) “Empowering forcibly displaced tech talent”  Trains and mentors refugee professionals in the IT sector to adapt their knowledge and experience to the needs of the global tech industry. |
|  | [**Renaisi**](https://renaisi.com/transitions/) is a social enterprise that helps employers build inclusive workforces by restarting the careers of refugee professionals so everyone can thrive. Their candidates are a mix of engineers, built environment and business services professionals, resident across the UK with right to work. |
|  | The [**Building Bridges**](https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/get-support/services/refugee-health-professionals-building-bridges-programme/) programme is an NHS funded partnership for Refugee Health Professionals living in London. Assists them to re-qualify to UK standards and secure employment appropriate to their professional qualifications. An accompanying [video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-R3y99SWmM) is available. |
|  | [**Breaking Barriers**](https://breaking-barriers.co.uk/) supports refugees into meaningful employment with advice, experience, and education. |
|  | [**Cara**](https://www.cara.ngo/)(the Council for At-Risk Academics) supports university academics, both in their home country, and if forced to flee, with mentoring, placements, and work via partner universities to rebuild their lives. |
|  | [**Ecctis**](https://www.ecctis.com/) operates official recognition services on behalf of the UK Government, including:  **UK ENIC:** the UK National Information Centre for global qualifications and skills (previously UK NARIC until the UK’s departure from the EU).  **The UK Centre for Professional Qualifications (UK CPQ)**: Provides advice and guidance to a variety of stakeholders, including professionals, professional bodies, employers, and sector skills councils. |
|  | [**Talent Beyond Boundaries**](https://www.talentbeyondboundaries.org/) matches skilled refugees with companies in need of their skills, particularly supporting those in camps or similar situations to migrate to countries in need of skills. |

## About

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This guide is meant to be as useful as possible to professional bodies, so if there are any suggestions for improvements, additions, clarifications, or corrections please get in touch.

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