

MAKING STRIDES: A LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is part of a joint IPPR and Migration Yorkshire research project, [Making Strides: Making Strides: Refugee's employment trajectories in Yorkshire and Humber](#).

This project is under the umbrella of the Migration Yorkshire led [Refugee Integration Yorkshire and Humber \(RIYH\)](#), funded by the European Union Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). RIYH worked with research partners to develop unique research into refugee integration and create a regional plan shaped by refugees, communities and key organisations overseen by a regional refugee integration forum.

This research project explored the opportunities and challenges presented to refugees and people on humanitarian leave¹ when searching for employment that offers career progression opportunities. This literature review will outline how job progression has been theorised in existing literature and what research tells us about the challenges that refugees face when looking for good jobs that offer progression.

What is job progression?

Various research highlights the complexities around understanding career progression. People's career choices and views on career progression are influenced by psychological, sociological, geographical, historical, political, economic, and educational factors, and various models and theoretical frameworks try to reflect this.

Some literature looks at how career progression shapes the identity of the person. McMahon and Patton (2017) argue in their work that career progression and aspirations are influenced by a person's demographic background, personal characteristics, values deemed important within their life, and how they fit into their society. A person's career trajectory is also influenced by the environment into which they were born, the opportunities presented to them, and the socio-economic class they identify with.

Hodkinson (2008) also takes a sociological approach to understanding career decision-making and progression under the "careership" theory. This theory advocates for a nuanced understanding of career development, by connecting an individual's personal characteristics, skills, interests, values, and aspirations with their social networks, resources, and inequalities, all of which can shape their career trajectory. The theory also acknowledges that careers are not linear, and unexpected events in a person's life can

¹ Most available literature refers to refugees and not those with humanitarian leave to remain. When citing these studies, we refer to refugees only. Where relevant and known, we distinguish between those who have received status via the asylum system and those who have come to the UK via a resettlement programme or have otherwise received humanitarian leave.

significantly change a person's career path. Careership theory offers insights into how effective career counselling and support can lead to better decision-making and better-suited career paths for an individual with opportunities for progression.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2021) has also published significant research on career progression. Their research consisted of conducting online surveys across six countries to understand better the barriers people face in accessing career guidance services. The OECD regards career progression as “a fundamental policy lever to help adults successfully navigate a constantly evolving labour market through advice and information on job and training opportunities” (pg. 7). The research also highlights the importance of governments taking responsibility to provide strategic interventions to shape people's career trajectories.

In our report, *Making Strides*, the research participants consistently framed career progression as ultimately working towards a “good job.” Available literature has provided frameworks to define what a good job is. The Taylor Review, a government-commissioned independent review, examined the changing nature of work and its impact on worker rights and protections. The Review found that the labour market was changing in the context of a growing gig economy, and existing legislation to protect workers had become outdated. This risked the rise of insecure and exploitative work that harmed workers' health and well-being. While the Taylor Review acknowledged the importance of work-life balance and fair employment practices, it argued that a comprehensive definition of “good work” should extend beyond initial job placement. The Review called for greater government awareness of career progression pathways and effective support mechanisms to enable people to progress within their chosen careers. With a wide array of recommendations, the Review culminated in the Good Work Plan. The government's responded by outlining its intentions to implement recommendations aimed at improving workers' working conditions and rights (Taylor et al 2017).

Additionally, the Trade Union's Congress (TUC) also has set out a definition of “decent work” in their Great Jobs Agenda (2017), which identified the following as constituting a “great job”: having a voice at work, fair and decent pay, regular hours, fair treatment and respect, healthy workplaces, and opportunities for learning and progression.

What are the experiences of refugee groups of job progression?

Research indicates that refugee groups in the UK tend to have poorer labour market integration outcomes than the wider migration population. Ruiz and Vargas-Silva (2018) note that refugees are less likely to have readily transferable skills for the UK labour market because their motivations for resettling in the country differ from migrants who arrive in the UK for economic reasons. Those who have been forcibly displaced are also dealing with the potential additional challenge of processing traumatic events or experiencing health and well-being issues, which can prevent them from being able to work.

Refugee groups face numerous barriers to securing employment in the first instance, making career progression even more challenging. These include poor English language proficiency, limited access to learning support, lack of local work experience, difficulties in verifying qualifications, and employer discrimination (Bloch 2004, Stevenson 2019).

Gendered barriers, particularly related to caring responsibilities, can further complicate employment prospects for refugee women. (Holtom and Iqbal 2020).

While abundant research is available on the experiences of refugee groups entering the labour market, less attention has been given to their progression pathways once employed. However, studies that explore this topic tend to agree that job progression is a significant challenge for refugee groups.

People will often find themselves working in entry-level positions, limiting their access to meaningful opportunities in the workplace. Gloster and Wimalasiri (2022) demonstrate that the tendency for refugee groups to work in typically entry-level roles limits access to meaningful opportunities to progress in the workplace. Furthermore, a study by Holtom and Iqbal (2020) explored refugee employment in Wales and found an overrepresentation of refugees in part-time, insecure, and self-employed positions. The study concluded that the scale and the complexity of institutional and structural barriers refugee groups face significantly hinder their career aspirations, regardless of how “resourceful, creative and determined they are” (pg. 111).

Similarly, Arthur et al (2023) touch on the concept of “survival jobs” within refugee groups. These jobs, often not commensurate with their skills and experience, are characterised by precariousness and provide limited opportunities for skills development. This negatively affects both a person’s career development and well-being, potentially leading to an increased reliance on social support.

Another study focuses specifically on the experiences of refugees who have built specialised careers, such as medicine and education. Davey and Jones (2020) interviewed 15 refugees as part of their study and found that when participants encountered obstacles in practising their profession, they struggled to restore their former professional identity and develop alternative identities. As a result, they felt a sense of loss of identity, hindering their ability to progress further in their career paths.

Literature on the case studies in the “Making Strides” report

In our report, we explored the career trajectories of four specific case study groups. However, studies are limited, particularly in the case of humanitarian routes that have only been established in recent years, such as the British National (Overseas) (BN(O)) visa, the Ukrainian schemes, and the Afghan schemes. Below is what is known about people who have arrived on these routes and their experiences of looking for work.

Hongkongers on the British National (Overseas) Visa Route

The Home Office (2022) conducted a UK-wide survey of 500 people who arrived in the UK from Hong Kong on the BN(O) route and found that 69 per cent of visa holders were educated to a degree level or higher, and half had managerial or professional backgrounds. Additionally, a study by the UKHK network (2022) surveyed 1,081 Hongkongers and revealed that the most common concerns were employment and finances. Most respondents required support with language acquisition, employment, and training, with preference for careers in IT and information management, administrative and clerical work education and training, accounting, banking and finance, and transport and logistics.

A third survey of 586 people was conducted by the UK Welcomes Hongkongers project and Good Neighbour church (2022), which echoed these findings. 67 per cent held degrees, while 30 per cent were looking for jobs, 23 per cent were in full-time employment, 16 per cent were in part-time work, 16 per cent were homemakers and 10 per cent were retired. In this survey, respondents said their main priority was finding suitable homes and school places for children. Second to that was securing employment. This is because BN(O) visa holders must demonstrate that they can maintain and accommodate themselves for a minimum of six months, and therefore, most BN(O) visa holders are likely to have savings to demonstrate eligibility for entry into the UK.

Finally, an unpublished small-scale qualitative IPPR study on BN(O) visa holders in Scotland underscored the desire among Hongkongers for greater employability support, particularly around skills and qualifications recognition, vocational training, and access to employment-related information and guidance (Mort et al 2023).

Ukrainians on the Homes for Ukraine scheme and the Ukraine Family Scheme

A Europe-wide study found that the labour market inclusion of Ukrainians had been faster than other refugee groups (OECD 2023). Of those who have arrived in the UK through the Homes for Ukraine scheme or the Ukrainian Family Scheme, around 80% are highly educated and possess relatively good English skills. However, challenges persist, including childcare issues leading to prevalent part-time work. This is likely since women and children have primarily arrived in the UK on these routes.

According to a survey by the ONS (Office for National Statistics) (2022), while many had highly skilled jobs in Ukraine, half of the survey respondents work in different sectors than before, often due to taking any job opportunity made available to them (44 per cent), language barriers (39 per cent), or unrecognised qualifications in the UK (17 per cent). As of June 2022, the most common sectors that Ukrainians were employed in were accommodation or food service industries (29 per cent), manufacturing (8 per cent), and wholesale or retail trade (8 per cent).

Afghans on the Afghan Relocation Assistance Programme (ARAP)

More in Common and USPUK (Universal Sponsorship Pathway UK) surveyed 286 ARAP arrivals, which identified potential for successful integration. While 56 per cent of respondents possessed strong English skills and were often highly educated, the survey also revealed significant disparities, especially among women who were family members of interpreters, who tended to have lower English proficiency. While 38 per cent were employed, 62% remained out of work. Notably, 51% of women were not actively seeking employment (Anstruther et al 2023).

The survey also indicated two key issues that were significant hurdles for Afghans looking to secure work commensurate with their skills and qualifications. First, bridging hotels, intended as a temporary measure, negatively impacted integration efforts because they held families back from “putting down roots and getting consistency in education, healthcare and employment” (Gower 2023). 52 per cent of respondents expressed that securing permanent accommodation close to job opportunities was an urgent priority. However, transitioning from bridging hotels has been challenging, with many families

receiving notices to vacate without adequate alternative accommodation being lined up for them.

The second significant hurdle that ARAP arrivals have faced is the lack of recognition of their skills and qualifications. An external review of Operation New Hope, the support programme for ARAP arrivals, identified that limited language support, inadequate skills-based training, difficulties in verifying qualifications and insufficient tailored employment assistance were some of the issues faced by ARAP arrivals. Employers also did not accept references that were not recent. Additionally, jobcentres focus on short-term solutions so that Afghans can secure any job regardless of their background and skills, impacting their ability to find good jobs that match their work background (Tyrone 2022).

Asylum route refugees

While numerous studies explore refugee employment experiences, most focus on those navigating the mainstream asylum system, the primary route for people seeking refuge in the UK, outside of the bespoke humanitarian routes introduced by the government in recent years.

Those granted status through asylum will experience the general barriers discussed earlier but will also be negatively impacted by the employment ban placed upon them while waiting for a decision. Asylum seekers may only work if they have been waiting longer than 12 months or more through no fault of their own. Even then, they are restricted to jobs on the shortage occupation list published by the Home Office.

Fasani et al (2020) conducted a European-wide study investigating the medium- to long-term effect of employment bans. The study revealed that such bans, even when an individual gets their status and the right to work, can reduce employment chances by 15 per cent, disproportionately affecting those with lower educational backgrounds, thus pushing them towards lower-quality jobs.

As of September 2023, 124,461 people waited over six months for an initial asylum decision. The combination of prolonged uncertainty and restrictions on working means that people struggle to make up for lost time once they have gained status and the right to work (Lift the Ban 2020). Significant gaps in employment can also be seen negatively by prospective employers, can lead to the erosion of skills, affect an individual's confidence and self-esteem, and adversely impact overall mental health and well-being (Dempster et al 2022).

What common policy recommendations emerge from the literature?

While few policy proposals directly address the specific challenges experienced by the refugee groups studied in the *Making Strides* report, broader trends in policy recommendations offer valuable insights. Most research agrees that any recommendations to support refugees in job progression do not have a “silver bullet” solution, and a multi-pronged approach is necessary, with the support of various stakeholders, to ensure successful integration and better job progression opportunities for refugee groups.

Some studies emphasise the vital role that career guidance can play in ensuring people attain career progression. Hodkinson (2008) highlights that career guidance can help people build control over their lives and, therefore, find work that is fulfilling. However, skilled professionals who understand career pathways and an individual's aspirations are necessary to offer quality advice. Good career guidance requires a holistic approach that values individual control and the development of a person's career aspirations beyond placing them in any entry-level job. Arthur et al (2023) recognise that many career services focus on getting refugees into any job, not long-term career development. Their research concludes that higher-quality career advice is necessary to move refugee groups beyond entry-level roles.

Davey and Jones (2020) call for streamlined, speedy processes to recognise and integrate skilled overseas professionals. Especially in the UK, where there is a shortage of skills in sectors like education and medicine, a flexible approach to accreditation could mitigate these shortages. The OECD's study on the labour market integration of Ukrainian refugees (2023) recommended boosting job search support, improving the verification of foreign qualifications, and having a more sophisticated system for assessing skills to maximise employment potential.

Wilimarsi and Gloster (2022) highlight the importance of employers proactively supporting refugees as part of their hiring practices. Understanding the advantages of hiring people from a refugee background can fill skills shortage gaps, increase diversity within organisations, and meet corporate social responsibility priorities.

Abundant literature points towards the importance of improving English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision to support refugees in improving their employment and progression prospects. This was highlighted in the study by Holtom and Iqbal (2020) and More in Common and USPUK (Anstruther et al 2023). The latter stressed that for Afghan women in particular, accelerating language support in parallel to employment support would be more effective, rather than a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.

Finally, recommendations addressing structural barriers that prevent progression, such as employment bans for people seeking asylum, have also been highlighted in research. For example, Fasani et al (2020) stress the need for a zero-cost policy that accelerates refugee integration by removing employment bans to ease access to the labour market. Such initiatives require no funding and would only require legislative intervention.

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