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A BETTER FUTURE?

Understanding Refugee Entrepreneurship (BFURE)

Research Report

Deema Refai, John Lever & Radi Haloub

In Syria once upon a time dwelt a company of rich merchants, trustworthy and true – Chaucer (1392)

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Interview Key

- FGP = Focus Group Participants
- LA = Local Authority
- RSP = Refugee Support Agency
- RE = Refugee Entrepreneur

BIOGRAPHIES



Dr Deema Refai

Dr Deema Refai is a Lecturer in Enterprise and Entrepreneurship at the University of Leeds. Deema has developed her research focus around refugee entrepreneurship, where she has led relevant funded research projects. Through her work, Deema has developed strong collaborations with charities and refugee councils supporting refugees in different countries, with particular focus on the UK and Jordan.



Dr John Lever

Dr John Lever, Reader at the Department of Management/ University of Huddersfield, has been conducting research on various aspects of immigration for over a decade. This has included work on Jewish and Muslim immigration, the asylum system, migrant workers, and migrant/ refugee entrepreneurs. His current interests revolve around refugee food entrepreneurs.



Dr Radi Haloub

Dr Radi Haloub is a Senior Lecturer in Strategy and Business Ethics at the University of Huddersfield. Radi is currently looking at the impact of culture and religion on social integration of minorities in developed countries and the role of businesses, such as healthcare facilities and pharmacies in supporting migrants and refugees.



KEY FINDINGS

This study set out to explore the skills and knowledge that refugees bring to the UK, and to assess how these can be harnessed to enable refugees to make a contribution to the UK economy to help further social integration.

Key findings are listed below:

1. Refugees arrive with different levels of professional and trade-based skills, knowledge and expertise.
2. As individuals, refugees face many difficulties transferring their skills and using their cultural knowledge in the UK.
3. Many highly skilled refugees end up in precarious forms of low skilled employment.
4. Many refugees arriving through VPRS are unprepared for life in the UK, and hence for employment and entrepreneurship.
5. Faced with fear, anxiety and shame, many take jobs in low skilled, precarious forms of employment.
6. Although Syria has strong history and culture of self-employment, many refugees choose the entrepreneurial path in the UK because they have no other choice.
7. For those who succeed in entrepreneurship, the journey is never straightforward, and success is intertwined with a wide range of complex factors.
8. Refugees’ entrepreneurial endeavours can be hindered by; 1) language; 2) legal and regulatory understanding and requirements; 3) inability to access financial support; and 4) policy constraints.
9. Some refugees set up small businesses and become successful, but in general these are a minority (middle-class group) within the wider refugee population.
10. National policy makers are increasingly focussed on economic integration and refugees with high growth potential over and above refugee protection and social integration.

Recommendations for policy makers in the UK:

1. Develop awareness of the cultural knowledge and expectations of refugees.
2. Recognise the skills, knowledge and expertise that all refugees bring to the UK.
3. Foster links between national and local Government to develop inclusive labour market strategies.
4. Support refugee entrepreneurship that provides welfare support and labour market opportunities from within (rather than without) refugee communities.
5. Encourage and support refugee entrepreneurship across all socioeconomic groups, not just those with high growth potential



1. INTRODUCTION

The refugee journey is traumatic, and this can have a profound impact on the desire of refugees to demonstrate their usefulness in a new country. Many refugees also originate from countries with high self-employment rates and research suggests that high numbers of refugees are interested in self-employment when they arrive in new countries (Wauters and Lambrecht 2006; Heilbrunn and Iannone 2020). Moreover, in a changing international policy context focussed on economic development over and above refugee rights and protection (Betts and Collier 2017; Dauvergne 2018; Crawley 2021), there has also been a growing policy emphasis on refugee entrepreneurship (Refai, Haloub and Lever 2018; IOM 2018; Heilbrunn and Iannone, 2020). In the last decade in particular, as the European migration crisis intensified, Syrian refugee entrepreneurs have been the focus of attention, both in countries bordering Syria and in countries across the Global North (Heilbrunn et al. 2019). This report focusses on Syrian refugee entrepreneurs in the UK.

1.1 Overview

Since the onset of the Syrian crisis in March 2011, Syrian refugees have been displaced at numbers estimated to be as high as 6.6 million inside Syria and 6.1 million outside Syria (UNHCR 2020). Between 2014 and 2017, more than one million Syrians had registered in European countries (OECD 2018). In 2017, the OECD (2017) raised concerns about the high costs incurred by the migration crisis, and this project set out to move beyond the overarching focus on costs (Crawley et al. 2017).

1.2 About the study

Given that those forced to flee their home countries would like to demonstrate their usefulness in destination countries, the study focussed on:

1. the knowledge and skills refugees bring to the UK,
2. how these can be harnessed to enable refugees to make a contribution to the UK economy in ways that help to further social integration.

We focussed on the 5 local authority areas that make up the Metropolitan County of West Yorkshire in the Yorkshire and Humber region in the North of

England: Bradford, Calderdale, Kirklees, Leeds and Wakefield. We originally planned to focus on Bradford, Calderdale, and Kirklees, but the COVID-19 pandemic made recruitment more difficult, and we therefore expanded the project to cover the wider region.

Figure 1: West Yorkshire

With a population of over 2.3 million, West Yorkshire



is highly diverse, with ethnic minorities making up nearly 20% of the population. Working primarily via the Regional Strategic Migration Partnership, Migration Yorkshire, the Refugee Agency, Horton Housing in Bradford, Sanctuary Kirklees and various other refugee support agencies and local authority groups across the five local authorities, we collected data through interviews, 'fact finding' focus groups, and online skills workshops. We termed the focus groups 'fact finding' because they were used to open up general discussions rather than to investigate particular issues.



Dr Radi Haloub from the research team in a focus group with Syrian refugees in Wakefield.

In total, we completed 12 interviews with Syrian refugee entrepreneurs and 8 interviews with local authorities and refugee support agencies. We also ran two ‘fact finding’ focus groups, attended by approximately 20 Syrians each, and three workshops, which were attended by more than 50 Syrian refugees and a number of refugee agency support staff; some refugees attended more than one workshop. We also ran an online workshop to disseminate findings involving various parties from academia and practice.

1.3 Structure of report

The report is structured as follows. In the next section we explore the policy background revolving around Syrian refugees and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs. Following that, we outline the wide-ranging skills, knowledge and forms of expertise that Syrian refugees bring to the UK, which is followed by a discussion of the challenges and barriers Syrians’ encounter. We then focus on a small number of successful entrepreneur stories. Finally, we present some conclusions and a set of recommendations.



2. CONTEXT

2.1 Asylum Seekers and Refugees

There are two main routes for achieving refugee status in the UK. Refugees either arrive independently to claim asylum or through resettlement programmes organised as partnerships between international refugee agencies and the UK Government. Although it is difficult to get exact figures for overall numbers, asylum seekers arriving independently represent 73% of the total number of refugees in the UK (Sturge 2019).

The number of asylum-seekers receiving support across Yorkshire and Humber in June 2020 was 5,728 (Home Office 2020). It is difficult to say how many of the 46% granted asylum every year (Sturge 2019) stay in the same location in the UK, but the number of asylum seekers receiving support in West Yorkshire in June 2020 was 3,272 (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Supported asylum seekers in dispersal accommodation across West Yorkshire in 2020	
Calderdale	348
Bradford	1,122
Kirklees	731
Leeds	813
Wakefield	258
Total	3,272

By 2017, the Gateway Protection Programme (operational since 2006) had settled around 8,500 refugees across the North of England and Scotland, with the largest numbers coming from the Congo, Iraq, Somalia and Ethiopia; no local authority data is available. In 2014, after a three-year-old Syrian boy was found dead on a Mediterranean beach, the UK Government announced the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement programme (VPRS). In partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), it was announced that VPRS would resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees from countries bordering Syria (Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq and Turkey) by 2020 (Home Office 2017).

By 2018, VPRS had resettled 10,538 Syrians (Home Office 2018), with the north of England taking over twice as many as southern England relative to its population (Easton and Butcher 2018). By the time VPRS was put on hold early in 2020 because of the Covid-19 pandemic, 19,768 Syrians had been settled across the UK. Of this total, 2,004 Syrians had been settled across Yorkshire and Humber, with around 49.5% of this figure being resettled in West Yorkshire (see Table 2 below). By this time, the Vulnerable Children Resettlement Scheme (VCRS), set up in 2016 to support 3000 vulnerable children from the Middle East and North Africa, had also settled 420 children across Yorkshire and Humber (Home Office 2020).

Table 2: Number of Syrians resettled via VPRS across West Yorkshire in 2020	
Calderdale	67
Bradford	373
Kirklees	129
Leeds	309
Wakefield	114
Total	992



2.2 Syrian Refugee Entrepreneurs

There is a long history of refugee entrepreneurs being successful in the UK, and many successful UK businesses, including Marks & Spencer and the Burton Group were originally set up by refugees. However, until recent changes in UN policy (UNCTAD 2012; IOM 2018), refugee entrepreneurship in the Global North was largely aligned with debates about migrant entrepreneurship (Heilbrunn and Iannone 2020). In the last decade in particular, as economic development concerns have overtaken concerns about refugee rights and protection (Dauvergne 2018, Crawley 2021), the policy focus on refugee entrepreneurs in countries such as the UK has also grown, with the Syrian crisis contributing greatly to this changing policy focus.

In the five years to 2017, the New Enterprise Allowance (NEA) programme supported by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) helped around 880 refugees, of which 350 refugee entrepreneurs eventually went into businesses (CFE 2018). In 2016, the Home Office supported Entrepreneurial Refugee Network (TERN) outlined plans to enable 1000 refugees to launch a business by 2025. By 2020, over 160 refugee entrepreneurs have received business support, which at the time of writing had helped to launch over 35 new refugee businesses nationally (CFE 2018; Osman 2020).

2.3 Syrian Refugee Entrepreneurs in Yorkshire

Horton Housing in Bradford have been resettling refugees through the Gateway Protection Programme (GPP) since 2008. After the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, they were approached by World Jewish Relief to work on a project to support refugees arriving through VPRS and VCRS into employment. This led to the emergence of the Specialist Training and Employment Programme (STEP) to support refugees arriving through VPRS to find employment. STEP initially ran in Bradford alongside other programmes delivered by Horton Housing. It was then expanded to Leeds, Sheffield and Coventry, and finally across Kirklees, Calderdale and North Yorkshire. While the programme was successful in Bradford, an interviewee suggested that it wasn't as successful as anticipated.

With the growing focus on refugee entrepreneurship, STEP in turn commissioned the Entrepreneur Refugee Network (TERN) to run a series of workshops to help refugees thinking about self-employment in Bradford. In total, 12 Syrian refugees attended the initial workshops organised by TERN, and seven made it to a business incubator stage. While the programme undoubtedly presented opportunities for refugees, an agency interviewee suggested that for many refugees it was also 'a bit of a reality check.'

Many refugees attended because they had run a business in Syria, didn't know how to start up in the UK, or because they simply didn't know what they wanted to do:

So, you had some people who were interested in setting up their own businesses but didn't necessarily know what they wanted to do, so just wanted to find out a little bit more. And then... you've got people who had their own businesses in Syria, so they knew exactly what they want to do, but just don't know how to do it here in the UK.' **RSA**

This was also the case in our online workshops, where many refugees attended simply to find out what support was available if they were to consider self-employment. One of the major challenges we faced as a research team was that some refugees attended our workshops hoping that they would be able to access financial support through our project; many quickly left when they realised that this was not the case. We had to clarify this point repeatedly.

As these programmes were expanded into other areas, things became more difficult. By this time, most of the middle-class professionals who arrived from Syria early had been supplanted by more vulnerable working-class refugees, who did not have the same resources, ability and language skills as the early groups. This presented agencies with more pressing challenges:

'[T]he other areas, when they first started setting up were saying, 'oh no, we're not getting anybody that's professional', but that's, kind of, what's happened to us... So, we are now... getting people who... haven't finished school, you know, have left school at 14. And then obviously, that brings... more challenges.' **RSA**

In this context, the decision to take only the most vulnerable refugees through VPRS was questioned by some agency interviewees:

'Britain deliberately chose to take the most vulnerable, which may be to some extent very good, but it may also bring with it problems, you know.' **RSA**

'So, there's a question. Maybe we should have said, we'll take the most employable.' **RSA**

A local authority interviewee also raised questions about the ability of this group to fend for themselves:

'It's not just poor English, a number them are also illiterate in their own language. How can we overcome that?' **LA**

The wider implication of these discussions was that many of the Syrians arriving through VPRS were unsuitable and unprepared for life in the UK.

These insights feed into wider findings from within the refugee entrepreneur literature, which suggest that refugee entrepreneurs face profound challenges building social networks, accessing resources and entering the labour market. This can be compounded by the psychological trauma of the refugee journey and by the unsuitability of refugees for paid work, which can lead to further instability and unease in host counties (Wauters and Lambrecht 2008; Heilbrunn and Iannone, 2020). We explore some of these issues in more detail below. The point to stress, however, is that suitable support is required, both for labour market integration, and for those willing to engage in entrepreneurship, if these problems are to be addressed effectively.

3. REFUGEE SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE

Through the stories of refugees, it was evident that many were self-employed in Syria. This is not surprising. Syria has a long history of trade, a strong business culture and a high-level of self-employment (Antoun et al. 1991; Halliday 1992; Bizri 2017). Moreover, many refugees have strong family and cultural legacy of self-employment. We heard many stories expressing similar sentiments:

“I am a tailor, I learned the profession from my Dad, who also learned it from his Dad. I can sew all types of clothes. Back in Syria I didn’t even accept small jobs as I had a lot of order for fashionable clothes for special occasions. This profession has provided for my family for generations, and I want to continue doing that. It’s all I know and it’s who I am.” **FGP**

“I have raised my children to be strong and proactive. It is very important to me that they know how to stand strong and build their lives... When I was in Syria, I used to travel a lot, and I used to ask my eldest son to answer and manage phone calls at work whilst I’m away, so he learns to become a responsible leader. I even used to send him to the bank with as much as a million Syrian liras to deposit!” **RE**

To some extent, this cultural legacy might explain the high level of interest in becoming self-employed in the UK and of refusing benefits and offers of employment, which were common. However, the cultural expectations of Syrians are challenged from the moment they arrive in the UK. The skills and knowledge required to be a successful entrepreneur are often very different to those required in Syria. This suggests greater awareness is needed if the cultural expectations of refugees are to be understood and support tailored

to meet those expectations and needs more effectively.

Refugees arrive with different types and levels of skill, knowledge and expertise. Those who fled Syria early to seek asylum in the UK were often from middle-class backgrounds with the means and resources required to flee Syria. This was also the case with the first group of refugees who arrived through VPRS, of whom many had university education and a good level of English (see Table 3 below). Many of these refugees had confidence in their ability to put themselves forward for opportunities and some became successful entrepreneurs.

This was not a straightforward process, however, and there were often many contributory factors in their decision to become an entrepreneur. A female refugee with a master’s degree in science, who had never been in business before, explained:

‘I think always to create an idea you need, like, different factors. Like, first of all, when you change your circumstances, you will look at things in different way... It’s maybe the matter of the need to thrive, you want to recover. It’s exactly like when you are about to sink, then somebody just give you a hand.’ **RE**

We also spoke with refugees arriving through VPRS with what could be described as ‘trade skills’ (see Figure 3 below). Despite the cultural complexities involved, a small number in both groups became successful entrepreneurs (see Section 5). We should also note, however, that a significant majority of highly skilled refugees across our case study localities were employed in low skilled, precarious forms of employment (see also Brown et al 2020).



Table 3: Previous Professions and Trade

PROFESSIONS	TRADES
Architect	Tailer
Civil Engineer	Bag maker
Pharmacist	Joiner
Teacher	Tiler
Professor	Electrician
Dental Technician	Builder
Midwife	Farmer
Nursing	Cook
Accountant	Chef

Dr John Lever from the research team (to the left) with Dr Ryad Alsous, who arrived in the UK as a Syrian refugee. Ryad is now working to secure the future of British Black Bees through the ‘Buzz project’, which offers refugees and local residents a chance to work together.

4. CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

Once refugees start considering entrepreneurship in the UK they quickly realise that any skills and knowledge gaps are exacerbated by a range of factors. In our previous work in Jordan (Refai, Haloub and Lever 2018), we identified three main obstacles to engaging in entrepreneurial activity: social, legal and financial. To this, we add a fourth, policy constraints.

4.1 Social Challenges

Syrian refugees face numerous social challenges. For example, unfamiliarity with the UK society and culture are often exacerbated by a lack of language skills, particularly for those with trade-based skills:

‘I am a joiner, but can’t find any joinery jobs here, I need a qualification and can’t get that because of language barrier.’ **FGP**

‘I work in tiling, but I can’t do it here! I was told I need a special qualification to work formally, and I can’t get that qualification because of the language barrier.’ **FGP**

‘My brother and I have 15-year experience as electricians. When we arrived here, we told them about our experience but were told we need to get a formal UK qualification, and for that we need English language, which we don’t have.’ **FGP**

‘I’m here for 2.5 years. Arrived from Lebanon through UNHCR. I used to work in sewing, in large factories, at a professional level. I told them about my experiences when I arrived but it’s not possible to find me a job because my English is very weak’ **FGP**

Among uneducated refugees, poor language skills are often compounded by poor learning skills and by feelings of frustration.

As a consequence, many refugees opt for precarious, low-skilled forms of employment, including, cleaning jobs, car-washing, and labouring. This situation can also lead to other workplace challenges around understanding rights and regulations:

‘Nobody told me, nobody told me even what is my salary, how I can guarantee my rights? Like if I am working with an employer, I still do not know what my rights are.’ **FGP**

Such experiences were pervasive, and it was clear that this situation hindered wider processes of integration:

‘I know people in the college who have been in the UK for 15 years and still cannot speak English... They said that they were working, but they do not deal with English people and they did not get the chance to mix with them.’ **FGP**

Well-being and mental health also concerned refugees, and some suggested that isolation and social exclusion forces them into unsuitable and precarious forms of employment

‘I just had to accept any job because I was completely fed up with sitting down and waiting, it affected me in a very negative way, mentally, socially and emotionally.’ **FGP**

We also heard numerous stories of willing Syrian refugee entrepreneurs unable to make the first steps into business because of communication issues. Some missed out on opportunities for small start-up grants in some local authority areas simply because they could not access or understand relevant information. Taken together, the issues highlighted in this section draw attention to the processes through which refugees become dependent on the low-wage economy.

4.2 Legal Challenges

Understanding legal and regulatory requirements also hindered those who made the first steps into business. Understanding health and safety, building regulations and hygiene, for example, often presented significant challenges:

‘We wanted to sell to one of the big supermarkets, then realised how much training, work and preparation that requires. Lots of formal paper-work, capacity planning, need to employ people...’ **RE**

‘We had to spend about a year working on refurbishing this shop. It cost us a lot of money; more than we expected. We also knew nothing about regulations and council requirements.’ **RE**

‘When we started, we couldn’t make our food product at home because it needs to be in a hygiene place. So we started in a place... which my brother-in-law licensed earlier to start a fried chicken shop.’ **RE**

Once again, these issues were often complicated by the lack of effective language and communications skills.

Lack of understanding about regulatory requirements also creates cultural anxieties about breaking tax rules and regulations, for example, and becoming indebted to Government agencies. This was stressed by a few agency representatives, who suggested that some refugees are very hesitant about starting up a business because they do not understand the system. In some cases, this can encourage informal business arrangements and poor business practice:

‘Can I please ask you [the research team] to be very clear with refugees on the fact that they will not have to pay tax right from the beginning of their business start-ups. Perhaps clarifying the basic tax regulations to them in Arabic during your online workshops would help them realise that whilst it is important, it’s not something that cannot be managed’. **RSA**

‘Taxes are a constant worry to them, and such worry can drive them to informal routes to business’. **RSA**

This situation is often compounded by financial challenges.

4.3 Financial Challenges

Many willing entrepreneurs had financial problems and for the vast majority of refugees hoping to enter business there is no financial support or funding available:

‘We applied to so many sponsors including charities... councils, company house... they all praised the initiative, but said it is a huge project and we can’t support it financially.’ **RE**

This should not be viewed as a problem for refugees specifically, as all funding applications require a significant level of credibility and rigour. Nevertheless, these challenges were significant and pervasive.

Some refugees suggested that benefits dedicated for business set-up would be a good option, while others suggested enrolling refugees in training courses that build on the skills and knowledge they already have:

‘Maybe use the money that is given to refugees to support them in setting up small projects... joinery, electricity, bakery...’ **FGP**

‘It would be great if they could offer us courses to build on what we have already, and not start from zero level.’ **FGP**

Analysis by the Centre for Entrepreneurs (CFE 2018) suggests that making business support available for all 20,000 Syrians resettled through VPRS has the potential, at a cost of just £4.8m, to move in this direction. This would arguably save UK taxpayers £170m over a five-year period, which represents a 35x return on investment. There would be other added economic benefits, including increased tax revenues.

Nevertheless, given the vulnerability of many Syrian refugees arriving in the UK via VPRS, the issues involved are perhaps not as straightforward as they appear. We therefore reiterate the points made above. Greater awareness is needed of the cultural expectations and needs of refugees, both for labour market integration and for those attempting to engage in entrepreneurship.

4.4 Policy constraints

It is widely recognised that the immigration policy environment has become more hostile in recent decades (Goodfellow 2020; Griffiths and Yeo 2021). In this context, coordination between local and national policy makers has unravelled significantly, and regional support agencies have been left to pick up the pieces. In Yorkshire and Humber, Brown et al. (2020) report that Migration Yorkshire (the regional migration partnership) is now the only way for local agencies across the region to make contact with national policy makers.

In this fragile policy context, it is often difficult to engage refugees in what many of them regard as an unpredictable and dangerous policy process. Early in the project the Home Office asked the research team to invite all our refugee contacts

to an event, where they could showcase their entrepreneurial skills and business ideas, but this proved all but impossible. Engagement with local authorities could also be difficult, as refugee support services are often disjoint, fragmented, and overstretched, which reduces access to support services and undermines the impact of provision.

Refugees face numerous policy constraints in this context. After being resettled in West Yorkshire in line with VPRS resettlement quotas, many refugees recounted being offered training and employment far from where they have been resettled with their families:

‘After a long journey, I managed to start a life with my family here in this town; it’s been tough, and now I am expected to start working at a job somewhere else. I can’t move again!’ **FGP**

‘Despite that I have an artificial hand – my hand was amputated in the Syrian war – I am still listed as a job seeker and expected to find a job. They asked me to work in security and overlook security camera, but for that I will need to attend a number of courses. I said that is fine. They booked me on courses once in Wales and another time somewhere else, and I couldn’t go to these trainings.’ **FGP**

These issues were controversial, and it appears that many refugees often resettle elsewhere to be near fellow refugees, where they can receive and provide mutual support to counter the social exclusion and isolation these policies engender:

‘I spent the first two years in the UK doing absolutely nothing. We were deported to an Island in Scotland, which used to be called the Island of Death.’ **FGP**

Another issue that surfaced related to the threat of financial benefits trapping refugees in dependency. This is a complex policy issue that brings the cultural complexities of resettling refugees from a country with a strong history of self-employment to the force.

We heard numerous stories of refugees refusing welfare support, for example, or offers of employment, for these reasons:

‘I would think twice before taking any job. The house that you were given by the council and the benefits they pay for you; it is a serious step to take as you will need to start from Zero.’ **FGP**

These barriers and challenges mean that successful entrepreneurial endeavours are largely self-driven, built around using minimal resources, and dependent on friends and family and on learning the job ‘as you go’.

Two refugees who set up a small café and takeaway in a suburban neighbourhood outlined the issues involved succinctly. After attempting to learn English at college, they gave up benefits and took a loan from friends to build on the cultural skills they had from working in a similar business in Syria:

‘Our experience was limited to food, which is the core of the business really, but this was not enough as we came to understand the other legal requirements as we started the project. We had to move in very small and gradual steps; sometimes having to move backward before we can move forward again.’

Addressing these issues effectively present complex policy challenges. After missing out on a small start-up grant, these refugees eventually received a Government grant during the Covid-19 pandemic, which allowed them to keep the business viable by investing in an online delivery platform.



A Syrian refugee start-up entrepreneur, who managed to buy a second-hand caravan with minimal resources, refurbish it, and use to start his own business where he sells authentic Syrian falafel.

5. SUCCESS STORIES

While the challenges encountered by refugees present significant obstacles to entrepreneurship, and to integration, we encountered a small number of entrepreneurs and business start-ups at different stages of development.

Some of these refugees formulated their ideas around businesses they ran in Syria, or in neighbouring countries, but needed to work out how to do it in the UK, as shown in mini case-study 1 (Appendix 1). Others had already started their businesses on a small scale in the UK and had started to promote their products/ services through limited networks, but needed support to expand their business, as shown in mini case-study 2 (Appendix 2).



Dr Deema Refai from the research team (to the left) with Razan Alsous. Razan is a Syrian pharmacy graduate, who founded the successful Yorkshire Dama Cheese Company.

Others had managed to grow their UK business to become well established nationally, and sometimes even internationally, as shown in mini case-study 3 (Appendix 3).

It was interesting to see how refugee entrepreneurs define success. A number of them saw entrepreneurship as a means to preserve their cultural and social value, which they were worried they might lose in the UK.

‘I started an Arabic teaching school. I wanted to teach Arabic to the younger generation who left Syria too soon. I felt sorry for them as Arabic is part of their heritage and religion. I believe there is much reward in such thing. I felt it is part of my duty to give them the chance to learn Arabic and preserve their culture and heritage.’ **RE**

Some expressed the view that entrepreneurship can support Syrians by introducing their social and cultural values into the UK in ways that promote integration and cultural cohesion.

‘We tried to include somethings to reflect our Syrian culture in the business to the wider audience; for example, the decorations, the lights with coloured glass, the name of the restaurant, the design of the oven and others.’ **RE**

This was particularly evident in food and culinary businesses:



A picture from a restaurant set up in a town by a Syrian refugee.

‘Food is at the heart of Syrian culture, and we wanted to transfer some of that culture here to the UK.’ **RE**

‘We don’t see it as a business only, it’s part of our heritage presented to the UK community, our foods, our ways of eating, our lovely spices and combinations are all here in this restaurant.’ **RE**

Furthermore, agencies also reflected on the changing perceptions around gender roles at family levels through business start-ups. Several female refugees highlighted the fact that women were often not expected to set up a business in Syria, as this is seen as a responsibility for men solely. Yet lots of female refugees in our case localities were clearly interested in setting up businesses, and some had. An agency representative reflected:

‘Females in general have been absolutely amazing, and they show a good level of dedication by working hard and starting to think about the future and how to support their families’ and children’s lives, while also maintaining the balance and patience at their homes by fulfilling their other duties to be mothers, wives and housekeepers.’ **RSP**

This not only presents challenges within Syrian communities, it also presents challenges for support agencies. Having an Arabic speaking female in the research team was clearly seen as an advantage and we were asked to run female workshops, though we were prevented from doing this by the Covid-19 health pandemic.

It is also worth noting that refugees who become successful in business often have a great deal of luck along the way, and that this is often wrapped up with other factors:

‘[T]oday (I am really lucky) I got an original English Bee Cell, which is rather rare to find. A lady in Manchester gave it to me; she said I couldn’t possibly find anyone who could take better care of it.’ **RE**

The meeting outlined in the above quote took place after the refugee concerned had spent two difficult years supported by family and friends attempting to find work as a beekeeper. Our research suggests that few of the refugees arriving via VPRS are capable of pursuing entrepreneurship in this context.

5.1 New opportunities for refugee entrepreneurs?

In 2019, the Home Office (2019) launched a series of new refugee entrepreneurship pilots in the UK. In general, the numbers are smaller than in previous programmes; the requirements are more demanding; and the focus is moving towards entrepreneurs with high growth potential, much as it is for migrant entrepreneurs (Jones et al 2018). As the application process becomes more stringent, the level of support refugee entrepreneurs can achieve is also declining.



6. CONCLUSIONS

Through a two-year journey with Syrian refugees on this project, it became evident that the contribution refugees can make to the UK economy through entrepreneurship is not a simple proposition; it is one subject to many constraints and obstacles. On the one hand, some of those obstacles are imposed by the vulnerabilities of refugees themselves, and by the cultural contradictions evident in the refugee journey. On the other hand, refugees face numerous legal, social, financial and policy-related constraints, which hinder their entrepreneurial endeavours and their ability to bring business ideas to fruition. Combined with the fear of being in debt with Government agencies, which is perhaps another cultural legacy of their journey from Syria, many refugees think twice before giving up on benefits, accepting a job, or becoming an entrepreneur. This is not surprising, as underlying policy context presents innumerable obstacles and challenges, which only a small number of refugees are capable of overcoming.

Recommendations for national policy makers

1. Develop awareness of the cultural knowledge and expectations of refugees.
2. Recognise the skills, knowledge and expertise that all refugees bring to the UK.
3. Foster links between national and local Government to develop inclusive labour market strategies.
4. Support refugee entrepreneurship that provides welfare support and labour market opportunities from within (rather than without) refugee communities.
5. Encourage and support refugee entrepreneurship across all socioeconomic groups, not just those with high growth potential



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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Mini case study 1: Majd was an entrepreneur with a successful business before coming to the UK. He is now looking for help to develop his business idea in the UK.

My name is Majd Almulhim from Damascus/ Syria. I left Syria to Jordan, where I stayed for 8 years. I didn't run a business back in Syria as I was studying. In Jordan, I wanted to start a business around an idea that I like and am comfortable with. So I started developing more understanding of the gifts, makeup, perfumes and accessories markets.

I liked the feeling of being part of a business and enjoyed that a lot. So, I decided to set up my own business in this field. First, I trained for 8 months in a shop where I developed a better understanding of the business and sector. Then, I started thinking more deeply about how I can set up a unique business and distinguish myself from others. My thoughts were around how I can create something with the little resources I have. Here, I always remind myself of my motto in life, and that is: "You can make something out of nothing!"

After 1 year of gaining experience, I took the initiative to start my own business, and opened my own shop. I thought "nobody wants to stay employed!". I started the business and opened my shop in a very critical location. There were some fears about possible challenges there as two shops were already established

in the area and were already competitors in the same field. They were strong and well known in that area in Jordan, but I was confident of my ability to be unique and overcome the hesitation that was inside me.

I tried to be unique through the way I deal with my customers, and my eye-catching products, which were of good quality. Honestly, I was able to beat my competitors, and the other shops near mine all closed down. When I first opened my shop, it was 3m x 4m, and I was able to expand it to 16m2. I also employed 7 employees in addition to myself. I worked hard and thank God I was able to build a strong and unique name in the area where I opened my shop. My vision is "To be the first place that comes into the mind of anyone who is thinking about a gift or flower bouquet idea" and thankfully I was able to reach this stage and succeed.

A lot of people ask me 'why did you decide to leave Jordan when you had such a success story?' The reason I left is because I wanted to expand my business and apply my ideas on a wider scope. I believe more opportunities can be available for me here, and I will be able to exploit those opportunities through the unique products and service that I offer.



Appendix 2: Mini case study 2: As a young professional, Roula could not employ her professional skills in the UK. However, she managed to start-up a business online, and is looking for support to expand her business nationally.

My name is Rola Abdulkareem, and I am starting my own resin art business initiative 'ARTISAN'. I am from Aleppo in Syria. I completed my studies in Syria in Accounting, then became employed in a Telecommunication company and a bank in Syria. This work gave me a lot of experience and exposure.

After long journey and a long wait to join my husband (who arrived before me to the UK) I completed my formal papers in order for me to arrive legally in the UK. I was then able to reunite with my husband and start my journey with him here.

When I first arrived in the UK, I tried to find a job in the same area of my specialty, but I realised it wasn't that simple. There were so many challenges. So, I started to take ESOL classes and then started doing some voluntary work in a few areas. Of course, everything now has come to a halt because of the pandemic. Nevertheless, during this time I continuously tried to look for something that reflects my positivity and takes me away from all negativity and my feelings of loneliness and longing. I looked for something to reflect peace and love. After a lot of searching and a lot of trials, failures and successes, I came across Resin Art, which I think is a wonderful thing to reflect such positivity and peace!

Resin Art wasn't something I was familiar with. So, I read a lot about it, watched a lot of YouTube

videos and searched to learn more. Then, I took the decision that I have to start doing my own work of art. I started to become more enthusiastic about the idea even though it started at the beginning merely as something to read about.

I started the journey by buying some materials and simple equipment. Then I started collecting some flowers. Collecting flowers by itself was a whole new world to me. Collecting flowers and drying them is a process that teaches you how to be patient and expect all sorts of outcomes. Sometimes you find the most beautiful looking flower, but once you use it with the Resin material it gives an unpleasant outcome!

Then I started to try with making accessories, then bookmarks, coasters, cake stands, and others! Ideas started flowing in, and now I make different varieties of things. I tried and tried a lot, and I am very thankful for the support I got from my husband, family and friends who encouraged me all the way long, and still do. Now, I have also set up my own Facebook and Instagram pages, and I am keen to get more support to expand my business more.

For more on Roula's business, follow her page on Facebook 'ARTISAN' at: <https://www.facebook.com/Artisan.Roula/>, and on Instagram at: [artisan.roula](https://www.instagram.com/artisan.roula)



Appendix 3: Mini case study 3. Adam is a Syrian Entrepreneur who ran an international business in Syria. In the UK, Adam could not find suitable employment where he could use his professional and trade skills. Nevertheless, his motivation and determination helped him to establish a successful business in the UK.

My name is Adam Agha, founder of 'Made in Syria' I am originally from Syria where I used to work in trading, particularly with the Chinese market, where I have lots of knowledge, skills and networks. When I arrived in the UK, I did some work with the UN on the UK resettlement programme and was able to empathize with the stories from people and the challenges around exclusion, communication and mis-perception.

My journey wasn't easy, I faced several challenges including finding a suitable accommodation for my family in a good neighborhood with good schools, but the fact that most refugees don't

have permanent jobs makes them perceived as high risk tenants by property agencies. It wasn't till this nice guy stepped in as a guarantor with an estate agency that I managed to rent a house.

Employment was difficult; I applied to Tesco, Sainsbury, WHSmith and many others, who were all interested in my experience in the Chinese market and wanted to employ me for that. However, I couldn't get a visa to travel to China as I didn't have a passport, with employers consequently losing interest. So I was jobless, and without enough cash to start a my own business! Until, one day, I was in a car boot sale, where

I saw a lady selling old books. She had like 500 books there. 'How much for the whole lot?' I asked, 'Ten pounds' she said. So I went home with the whole lot, and decided to test the book market on eBay. Not much to lose anyway. I listed the books for £2.49-2.99 with free postage and people were buying them! So I started to invest more time in selling them. I learned about topics that interest people and sell more through Amazon and eBay, and competed on price. I used my car to go to charity shops and buy interesting books that are hard to find or those with original author signatures. I probably went all over England not leaving behind any charity shop that I pass by!

However, books take a lot of space, and my English was very weak at the beginning. So I looked for books that appeal to Middle Eastern people like myself alongside local stuff as culinary traditional materials. I started contacting my friends in Lebanon and Turkey to send me items to sell here and share the profit with me, and that worked very well. Now all these friends migrated to Europe, but the business has grown, and I have two full time employees in Egypt and Lebanon, where I also have trade offices. I trade through Amazon, eBay, Etsy and an American trading website. In 2019 I was given an award for the best entrepreneurial business of the year by eBay, and in 2018 eBay sponsored a documentary that was filmed by national geographic about my approach to business, for the benefit of eBay.

The film showed how I train people to develop their trading skills, and help them set up their business on eBay. eBay also offered me the opportunity to deliver a training workshop in their main office in London, and since then I've also been invited to do workshops in Manchester, Halifax, Oxford, Nottingham, and more recently on Zoom.

My business is the first eBay business to sell Arabic products, 50% of our products and 99% of our books are sold only by us. My business was also successful in introducing "Islamic Celebrations" section in eBay through my networks with eBay management, and that has been received with a lot of welcoming from the market. It helped the wider community understand, for example, what Ramadan is and how it's celebrated and why through using short videos that also helped this wider community use traditional Arabic culinary to make Christmas sweets! So the journey is never easy, but I never lose the motive and always work hard.

For more on Adam's business, follow his business page 'Made in Syria' on Facebook at: https://www.facebook.com/madeinsyria.uk/shop/?ref_code=search_hcm_cta&ref_surface=global_search





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