

LIVES Impact



Labour Market Integration: Refugees and Asylum Seekers Face Ongoing Integration Challenges

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Over the past few decades, we have seen a striking increase in immigration. The UNHCR defines refugees as individuals who, due to conflict or persecution, are forced to flee their country of origin and are unable to return there because of serious threats

to life, physical integrity or freedom (UNHCR, 2011). They live in the host country, are protected under international law and may not be expelled. Unlike refugees, asylum seekers are people seeking sanctuary in another country, but whose claims regarding threats to safety have not yet been substantiated. They live in the host country and await refugee status.

This influx of immigrants is a major challenge for both the host country and the immigrants themselves. This study looks at the barriers and resources that 14 particular refugees and asylum seekers (ages 19–25), enrolled in a state integration programme in French-speaking Switzerland, perceive in their quest for labour market integration. The results illustrate that language proficiency is the main barrier and that they rely on a host of resources to achieve sustainable labour market integration. ➔

For refugees and asylum seekers, accessing the labour market is necessary but not sufficient to ensure decent work and a satisfying life. Indeed, when they manage to find a job, they often experience precarious employment situations (Bolzman, 2016). A report from the International Labour Organization (ILO) reveals, for example, that few refugees find a job in the formal economy, and many undertake precarious informal jobs, which involve a higher risk of poor working conditions and exploitation.

Refugees and asylum seekers are also more likely to have low job satisfaction and are at risk of de-skilling (Yoon, Bailey, Amundson, & Niles, 2019). This precariousness also depends on a socio-historical context. Indeed, during economic crises, labour market integration is even more difficult for these newcomers (Perez-Brena, Wheeler, De Jesús, Updegraff, & Umaña-Taylor, 2017).

Migration and Immediate Post-Migration Stressors

Migration in and of itself is often a stressful experience. Moreover, refugees and asylum seekers often bear the trauma or gruelling life experiences from their home countries and the migratory journey (Hynie, 2018; Schultheiss & Davis, 2015; Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya & Gonzalez, 2008). Furthermore, if immigrants feel threatened or lack requisite resources or effective coping strategies, they can experience even higher levels of stress. Once in the host country, refugees and asylum seekers find that employment opportunities and decent work are substantially limited (Stewart, 2007). Additionally, at different levels (individual and/or contextual), to further career development, labour market integration and access to decent work, they face a variety of impediments, including language difficulties; insufficient labour market knowledge; inadequate broader culture proficiency; under-valued academic diplomas and work experience; discrimination; and scant support (Atitsogbe, Udayar & Durante, 2019; Zacher, 2019).

Personal Coping Aides

Resilience, psychological capital, coping strategies, proactivity and career adaptability are considered valuable personal resources that help refugees and asylum seekers cope with and survive integration barriers (Newman, Bimrose, Nielsen & Zacher, 2018). One study shows that career adaptability impinges on the quality of reemployment status (Yoon et al., 2019). Having access to various types of social capital and support also seems crucial to overcoming these obstacles (Campion, 2018; Gericke, Burmeister, Löwe, Deller & Pundt, 2018). Finally, religion and spirituality help give meaning to work, thereby potentially motivating immigrants to choose specific career paths (e.g. working to help others) and seize opportunities (Constantine, Miville, Warren, Gainor & Lewis-Coles, 2006).

External Coping Aides

Career counselling can play a pivotal role in identifying immigrants' barriers and strengthening their resources in facing labour market integration challenges. In particular, narrative career counselling is shown to be effective (Abkherz & McMahon, 2017; Kennedy & Chen, 2012). Focusing on individuals' relation to work and taking into account people's life trajectories and the experiential meaning, this approach provides powerful support to young immigrants (McLlyeen & Patton, 2007).

More specifically, by tracing their life trajectories throughout a de-, re- and co-construction process, refugees and asylum seekers can identify their past and current barriers and acknowledge their resources. Moreover, resource awareness and positive stories foster their capacity to forge career plans with hope, confidence, optimism and the ability to seize opportunities (Abkherz & McMahon, 2017; Amundson, 2009; Kennedy & Chen, 2012).

The present research takes inspiration from the "journey of life" narrative metaphor (Denborough, 2014) that allows tracing one's life trajectory using storytelling, metaphors and drawing. Within the migration field, the journey of life can spur a fresh re-telling of stories – many intentionally or unintentionally forgotten – that can result in a reconnection with positive narratives of achievement and skills, resulting in self-reflection as resilient survivors rather than as disempowered persons. In the present study, the journey of life counselling tool could potentially provide insight into the influence of macro-level social and economic factors, which is a more realistic and inclusive way of understanding work and career.

Domains: "Barriers" and "Resources"

The barriers domain represents the factors that directly or indirectly impede the participants' social and labour market integration, while the resources domain represents reportedly reliable factors that lead to social and professional integration. Barriers include three sorts: cultural, emotional and material, while resources encompass social, personal and institutional subdomains.

The most common barriers category was language. More than half of the participants reported facing barriers to social and professional integration due to a lack of French proficiency. Despite their difficulties in learning written and spoken French, some participants felt confident that they would progress in the near future. Aside from language issues, two participants reported encountering other difficulties related to cross-cultural differences, ranging from the discomfort resulting from being the object of onlookers' stares to the confusion in learning cultural cues regarding the opposite sex.

Six participants reported experiencing emotional barriers due to distance and limited contact with country-of-origin family members and the feeling that they had "lost everything" in their home country. Three of them also reported feeling lonely.

In terms of personal and social resources, the refugees and asylum seekers recognised the importance of friends and family members, both in the home and host countries, as well as various professionals, including integration programme coordinators, job counsellors, job coaches, French teachers and social workers. This finding confirms that social relationships drive the process of integration (Ager & Strang, 2008).

Furthermore, personal resources also came into play regarding qualities, career interests, activities, values and work experience. Adaptability, optimism and punctuality, for instance, are qualities that assisted some participants. Sport, religion and reading were helpful activities for other participants. Internships, previous work experience or future job prospects were beneficial career-interest resources for many participants.

Finally, obtaining a residence permit was a much sought-after institutional resource for participants. Obtaining the permit motivated many participants to engage more in the integration programme and feel optimistic about escaping from an uncertain situation with seemingly interminable waiting.

In Conclusion

For refugees and asylum seekers, accessing the labour market is necessary but not sufficient to ensure decent work and a satisfying life. Frequently, refugees and asylum seekers experience precarious employment situations involving poor working conditions, exploitation and marked de-skilling, with only a small number able to find jobs in the formal economy. Young, newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers need, more than anyone else, the help of career counsellors to deal with their current life and work challenges and to successfully enter the labour market.

When working with disadvantaged populations from the least developed countries, career counselling must be innovative and adaptive, not constrained by its traditional approach limitations. Career counselling narrative or constructivist approaches, which analyse individuals' relation to work through respective life trajectories and self-assigned meanings, may significantly help counsellors better assist refugees and asylum seekers in their integration process. Beyond individual-based career intervention, however, it seems that more systemic, context-centred actions may be necessary for refugees and asylum seekers to reduce the barriers to their social and labour market integration. ■

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Related Publications

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