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The impact of educational achievement on the integration and wellbeing of Afghan refugee youth in the UK

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ABSTRACT

An unprecedented number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) have arrived in Europe over the last decade, and young Afghans account for the highest proportion of UASC across England, Scotland and Wales. Despite a wealth of UK policies aimed at ensuring positive outcomes for young people who have been through the care-system, and a rich body of research exploring the experiences of child refugees and asylum-seekers, less has been documented about the experiences of former UASC after they reach the age of eighteen. An example of practice-based research, this article draws on three new primary data sources to examine the factors that facilitate and impede the socioeconomic integration and wellbeing of young Afghans who arrived in the UK as unaccompanied children but who are now aged eighteen or older. We demonstrate the important role of educational achievement in creating socioeconomic opportunities, shed light on the ubiquitous influence of unresolved immigration status in detracting from wellbeing, and consider the future of these young people in the UK's current socio-political context.

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, migration flows of unaccompanied minors from the Global South to Europe have increased significantly (Menjívar and Perreira 2017). The number of arrivals doubled from 13,800 in 2013–23,300 in 2014, and then quadrupled to 96,000 by 2015 (Eurostat 2016). The majority (39%) of these young migrants have come from Afghanistan (ibid) and in 2016, 740 unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan claimed asylum in the UK (Refugee Council 2017). These young people are taken in to the care of the state, becoming 'looked-after children' until they reach eighteen.

This paper examines the factors that facilitate and impede the socioeconomic integration and wellbeing of young Afghan refugees and asylum seekers who arrived in the UK as unaccompanied children but who are now aged eighteen or older. Our data demonstrates a strong positive correlation between higher levels of education and improved socioeconomic outcomes, however, it ultimately suggests that unresolved immigration status can negate the positive contribution of education vis a vis socioeconomic wellbeing.

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We find that immigration status presents as the core challenge across the country, and that despite small differences in experiences according to region, the ability of immigration status to curtail educational progress and limit socioeconomic wellbeing is constant.

While much academic attention has been given to the experiences of child refugees and other migrants (interalia Lemberg-Pederson and Chatty 2015; Kohli and Mitchell 2007; Crawley 2006; Kanics, Hernandez, and Touzenis 2010), Allsop and Chase (2017) note scant focus on the lived experiences of these young people, of any nationality, after they reach the age of eighteen – their own work and that of their colleagues Sigona, Chase, and Humphris (2017) providing the notable exception. Similarly, despite Afghans representing the largest group of refugees worldwide in the 1980s and 1990s (Monsutti 2008) and Afghanistan consistently being one of the top ten asylum applicant countries to the UK for the last five years (Refugee Council 2017), the UK-based population is under-researched, with many gaps in knowledge (Vacchelli, Kaye, and Lorinc 2013). The literature on Afghan migrants in the UK that does exist comes from small-scale qualitative studies authored by charities, government and community organisations (see DCLG 2009 and Gladwell and Elwyn 2012 in particular). To the best of the authors' knowledge, there are no comprehensive systemic data sources on this group, and there are various challenges in gathering such information. Of particular note, country level analysis of socioeconomic outcomes for the non-UK born population from the most recent UK Census data is restricted to the top ten non-UK countries of birth for UK inhabitants, which does not include Afghanistan (ONS 2011a).

This study speaks to these gaps with new data on the experiences of Afghan care-leavers in the UK who were, before reaching 18, unaccompanied asylum seeking children. First, we provide an overview of Afghan migration to the UK and existing evidence on integration and wellbeing, highlighting the contribution of this study. Second, we discuss the data and methods used in this paper. Third, we analyse the education and socioeconomic data gathered through three distinct sources specifically for this study. In conclusion, we explore implications of this analysis for future research and policy.

2. Afghan migration and integration into the UK: an overview

Afghan arrivals have been a significant feature of migration to the UK for several decades (Gisselquist 2020; Vacchelli, Kaye, and Lorinc 2013; IOM 2014), and the population of Afghans in the UK was estimated to be approximately 50,000 in June 2011 (Rutter 2013). However, the socio-economic profile of Afghan migrants to the UK, characterised in previous decades by educated elites (Oeppen 2009; DCLG 2009), has shifted in recent years, with the proportion of less-educated and lower-skilled migrants increasing, and the acquisition of refugee status becoming more challenging (Majidi, van der Vorst, and Foulkes 2017). In 2016, 2341 applications for asylum were made by Afghans in the UK, with only 293 decisions granting refugee status made (Refugee Council 2017).

In the past decade, the number of unaccompanied male minors leaving Afghanistan has also notably increased (UNHCR 2010), and a significant feature of present-day Afghan migration to the UK is the prevalence of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC).¹ Afghans have long constituted the largest group of UASC in the UK (ADCS 2016), and yet few are granted refugee status (Refugee Council 2017).² The majority are granted a temporary form of leave, formerly Discretionary Leave to Remain, more recently

UASC Leave, which allows them to remain in the UK until they reach 18. At the age of 17.5 they begin a protracted process of applying for further leave to remain in the UK: many are refused, and risk being forced to return to Afghanistan. Since 2007, 2,018 care leavers have been forcibly removed to Afghanistan (Gladwell et al. 2016), and increasing numbers remain in limbo in the UK after being refused asylum and having exhausted all rights to appeal (IOM 2014). As such, Afghan care-leavers in the UK present as a particularly vulnerable group among migrants, and raise particular concerns in terms of integration and wellbeing that merit investigation.

2.1. Socio-economic integration and outcomes

Asylum seekers in the UK generally do not have the right to work.³ Research suggests that, even for those ultimately granted refugee status and, consequently, the right to work, periods of labour market inactivity negatively affect future employment outcomes (Stuart and Mulvey 2014) – largely due to psychological discouragement and skill deterioration (Cheung and Phillimore 2013; Fransen, Ruiz, and Vargas-Silva 2017; Gregg and Tominey 2004). Each year spent in the asylum process awaiting a decision has been found to reduce future employment rates by as much as 4–5% (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Lawrence 2016). Mental health difficulties are also often exacerbated by the time spent awaiting a decision (Kearns et al. 2017; Daniel et al. 2010), and this in turn limits the number of hours and the type of employment that can be undertaken (Kone and Vargas-Silva 2017). English language competency has also become a barrier to working in public sector roles in the formal labour market, with the Immigration Act 2016 placing a duty on public authorities to ensure that individuals working in customer-facing roles are fluent in English (ILPA 2016).

With regard to the Afghan migrant community in particular, some of the more rigorous quantitative data available relates to unemployment: it is particularly high, with 24% unemployment across economically-active age Afghans in London, compared to six per cent across London's economically-active total (Oeppen 2009). This pattern is consistent with Afghans across the UK, where 39% employment amongst Afghans aged 16–64 with varying levels of education (Rutter 2013) is significantly lower than both the national average for the same year (71.0%) and the employment rate of those with no qualifications at all in the wider UK population (43.5%) (ONS 2011b).

High unemployment data does however obscure Afghan participation in the informal labour market. Many report seeking informal work even after being granted the right to work as a result of a lack of knowledge about accessing the formal sector, and a fear of leaving welfare benefits entirely (DCLG 2009). Nonetheless, navigating the informal labour market is not without substantial risk. Following the Immigration Act 2016, a new offence of illegal working came into force on 12 July 2016, criminalising individuals who work while living in the UK unlawfully, or in breach of the conditions of their stay (ILPA 2016).

Studies suggest that where Afghans are able to find work, whether formal or informal, they undertake predominantly low-skill, low-paid work in the service industry – such as in restaurants, shops, takeaways, car-washes and hotels, or driving taxis (DCLG 2009). Discrimination in the formal and informal labour markets is also often reported (Rutter et al. 2007; Jones 2010). While a lack of qualifications and fluency in English may in part explain why many obtain this genre of work (DCLG 2009), others, with more advanced

qualifications from Afghan universities are also found in similar jobs, having struggled to access work appropriate for their skill level. Little recognition of non-UK academic qualifications has meant that some report a loss in social, economic and professional status since arriving in the UK, occupying lower-skilled roles than those they held in Afghanistan (DCLG 2009; Ruiz and Vargas-Silva 2017).

To date, no research on the socio-economic integration and wellbeing of young Afghans, particularly the significant group that have spent formative years as looked-after children in the British care system has been carried out. This paper makes a contribution in this area, and examines the role of both education and immigration status in informing socio-economic wellbeing.

3. Data and methodology

This article draws on three new data sources: quantitative data compiled through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to all Local Authorities in England – the first such effort of which we are aware; in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 31 Afghan care-leavers across 3 regions; and 14 key informant interviews with relevant experts.

FOI requests with 8 questions were submitted to all 152 Local Authorities in England in October 2017. Data was requested on the number of Afghan UASC and care-leavers up to the age of 24 in the care of each Local Authority, along with a breakdown of immigration status for these young people. Authorities were also asked how many of these children and young people were out of education at the date of their last review, and how many had achieved qualifications at particular levels (entry level, Level 1 or 2, Level 3) at the date of their last review. Finally, they were asked to state how many of these young people had entered university in the last three years.

One hundred and eight Local Authorities responded with data to at least one of the questions, 4 refused to respond due to the cost of gathering the data,⁴ 14 refused to respond under data protection legislation, 5 responded to say that they did not hold the data requested, and 21 did not respond and gave no reason for not doing so. At a national level, this data is not centrally collected for care leavers who were formerly UASC. The responses suggest the data are not systematically collected at the Local Authority level either, and different Local Authorities record different types of data in different ways. The analysis in this paper is based on data provided by the 23 Local Authorities who reported having 10 or more Afghan care-leavers and who responded to at least 6 of the 8 questions.

In addition, the article reflects the reported experiences of 31 Afghan care-leavers in England. Focus group discussions were carried out with 25 young people across three regions – London, the South East and the East Midlands, and in-depth interviews with an additional 6 young people across the same regions. The three regions were selected on the basis of (a) numbers of Afghan care leavers in the region and (b) the ability of RSN staff to conduct focus groups or interviews with young people there. 10 (32%) of the respondents were London-based, 13 (42%) in the East Midlands and 8 (26%) in the South East. The majority (13) of respondents were aged between 21 and 24, and one respondent was female. The vast majority of UASC and former UASC in the UK are male (ACDS 2016) and the Afghan population of former UASC is particularly male-dominated. The majority of respondents had either been in the UK for 2–5 years (13, or 42%) or

for 6–10 years (11, or 36%). The participants were selected from RSN and partner organisation databases: potential respondents meeting nationality, age and care-leaver status were contacted and focus groups were conducted with those who expressed interest in participating. All respondents were able to communicate adequately in spoken English, and interpretation was not necessary.

A further 14 key informant interviews were carried out with experts from across England. These included leaders of Afghan community organisations, senior social workers from Local Authorities, and senior staff from frontline NGOs providing support to Afghan care-leavers (often as part of a broader remit to support refugee and asylum seeking young people of all nationalities).

These data allow for comparison of evidence across multiple sources and exploration of regional variation. The qualitative data were analysed using an iterative coding process which allowed the data fragments in each transcript to be examined, and a set of thematic codes to emerge from the data. This set of codes was then added to routine intervals (following analysis of every additional transcript), and the full data set within each code was analysed for patterns, themes and links to other codes.

Carried out by researchers from the London-based NGO Refugee Support Network (RSN), this article is an example of practice-based research on refugee issues. RSN provides education-related support to over 500 refugee and asylum-seeking young people in England each year. In 2016–2017, RSN worked with circa 100 young Afghans in England. Strengths of adopting a practice-based approach in this particular instance included the benefits of RSN's networks in the setup of interviews; the ability to conduct the project through researchers with extensive experience engaging with young refugees and asylum-seekers; and access to institutional learning from the RSN Senior Management Team (SMT) compiled through almost a decade of observing the longer-term impacts (both positive and negative) on young refugees of participating in research. Challenges of a practice-based approach in this instance included a potential bias towards education within the networks of professionals and young people available to RSN, and the potential impact of a service-provider – recipient power imbalance influencing young people's responses. In order to mitigate for these risks, the research was carried out in-line with RSN's Research Ethics Framework (developed in response to the above-mentioned observations), Child Protection Policy and policies for safeguarding vulnerable adults. Informed consent was gained verbally from each participant in a 1:1 conversation about the research project prior to attending a focus group or interview. This was re-established verbally at the start of the focus group or interview, including a reassurance that young people could leave the group at any time, and request that their data and responses be excluded from the study at any time, including after the focus group had taken place. Data from all young person participants was fully anonymised by the issuing of a code to each young person at the focus group or interview stage.

4. Education and the socio-economic wellbeing of Afghan care-leavers in the UK: findings

Afghan care leavers in England are concentrated into four regions – London⁵, the South East, the East Midlands and the West Midlands (Figure 1), with three cities (Kent, London and Nottingham) having the highest numbers.



Figure 1. Numbers of Afghan care-leavers by region of England (from FOI data).

In every region of the UK except for the South West (which is the region with the third lowest number of Afghan care-leavers in the country), the majority of Afghan care leavers are living with unstable immigration status. Stable immigration status has been defined as Refugee Status or Indefinite Leave to Remain. The majority of those with unstable status are former UASC who were previously in receipt of Discretionary Leave to Remain or UASC Leave, but who were not granted an extension to this leave after turning 18.

Participant profile data reflects national data, with 18 (59%) of the Afghan care-leavers interviewed living with an unstable form of status.⁶ 13 (42%) are asylum seekers, with the vast majority of these (9) at the end, rather than the beginning of the asylum process. These young people have typically held Discretionary Leave to Remain, been refused an extension to their leave at 18 years old, exhausted the process of appealing this decision, and have now submitted a fresh claim for asylum on the basis of evidence not included in their original claim. This article will demonstrate the dominant impact of unstable immigration status on the potential of these young people to achieve socio-economic wellbeing in the UK (Figure 2).

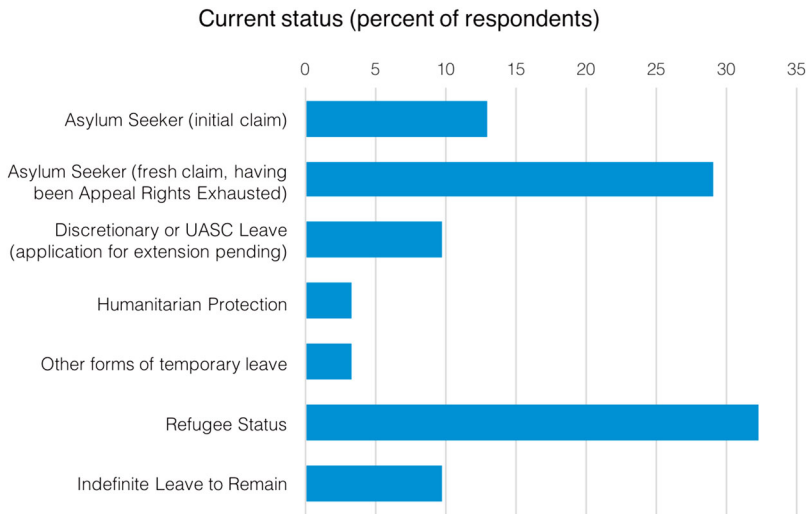


Figure 2. Immigration status (all focus group and interview participants). See Annex 2 for more detail on responded immigration status by education level.

4.2. Education profile of Afghan care-leavers

National data on the level of education obtained prior to arrival in the UK are not collected for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. However, a significant majority (20 or 64%) of the Afghan care-leavers interviewed for this paper had received no education, or Islamic education⁷ only, before arriving in the UK (see Figure 3). For those who had participated in mainstream education, it was predominantly at the primary level. Four (13%) had attended but not completed primary school, with only 2 (6%) having completed primary school. Three (9%) young people had attended but not completed secondary school before leaving Afghanistan, and only one had completed this level of schooling. Many young people spoke of arriving in the UK not able to write their name in English, and being functionally illiterate in their mother tongue. The responses of the professionals interviewed suggest similar patterns: all reported that the majority of young people they had worked with had either no, Islamic only, or partial primary education before leaving Afghanistan. In cases where young people had started or completed secondary school, this level of education was often as a result of either having politically engaged

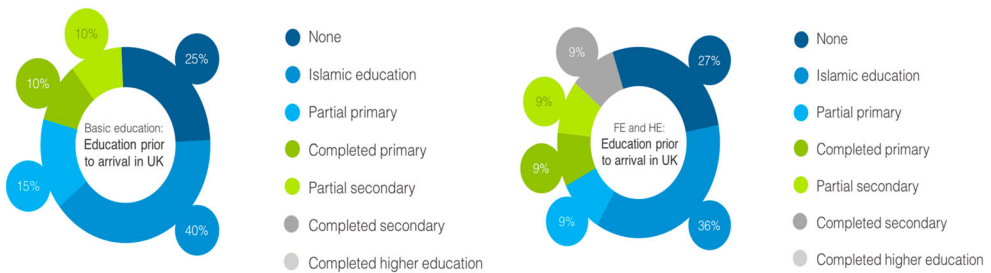
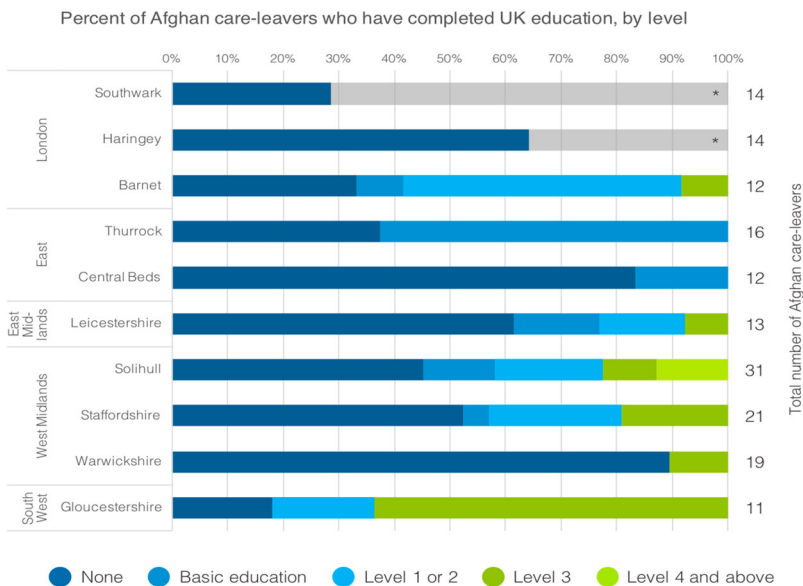


Figure 3. Education prior to arrival in the UK.

parents, or attending a secondary school in a Pakistani refugee camp. After leaving Afghanistan, long and difficult journeys, including periods in detention and makeshift refugee camps in transit countries, further contributed to the fragmented educational histories of the young people interviewed. Interestingly, no significant regional variation in educational profiles prior to arrival in the UK was found.

Prior to this study, data on educational achievement in the UK for Afghan care-leavers has not been gathered. The data returned suggests that Afghan care-leavers face significant struggles with educational progression (see Figure 4). In all Local Authorities that provided data, significant numbers of Afghan care-leavers are without any UK educational qualification, with the proportion with no qualifications over 80% in two areas and under 20% in only one. In the UK more broadly, only 8% of people in their twenties are without qualification (ONS 2011b), a figure not achieved amongst Afghan care-leavers in any English Local Authorities. Where qualifications have been gained by Afghan care-leavers, the majority remain at the basic level, with Entry (pre-GCSE) level qualifications only, and very few have progressed beyond Level 1–2 (equivalent to GCSE). In contrast, 86.7% of all 19 year olds across England were qualified to Level 2 or higher in 2016, and 61% were qualified to Level 3 (DFE 2017a). The proportion of Afghan care-leavers completing higher education (Level 4 and above) is predictably low – as a result of the age of the cohort in question (Figure 4). However, data collated on entrance to higher education in the last three years shows that there is a small but significant minority who excel academically, achieving high levels of education despite substantial disadvantage (Figure 5).



* Percent of Afghan care-leavers with basic education, within range shown; exact number not provided (LAs with less than 5 UASC do not have to respond to FOI requests under data protection legislation)

Figure 4. Percent of Afghan care-leavers aged 18–24 who have completed UK education, by level (FOI data). Note: There is some variation in LAs included in Figures 4 and 5 as a result of some LAs responding to some questions in the Freedom of Information request but not others. Data is shown where provided.

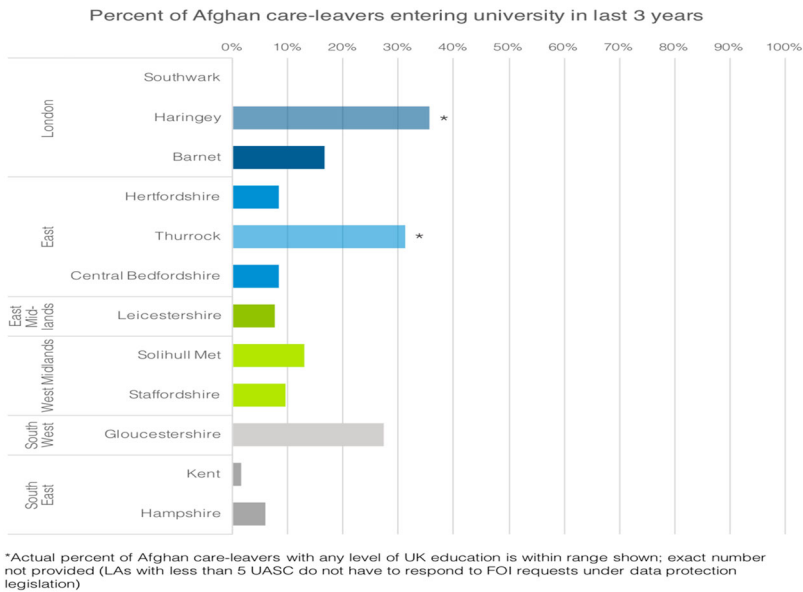


Figure 5. Percent of Afghan care-leavers entering university in the last 3 years (FOI data).

Comparable patterns emerge in the focus group and interview participant profiles, though the trend in general is towards slightly higher levels of education participation and achievement (Figure 6). This is likely a result of the young participants being identified by organisations involved in education or other forms of support for refugee and asylum seeking youth (Figure 7).

4.2.3. Barriers to educational progression

Over three quarters of the Afghan care-leavers interviewed expressed a desire to study at a higher level, and believed that this would help them find work they considered meaningful. When reservations about or disillusionment with the idea of studying further were expressed, it was only by those with basic level qualifications. Their rationale for stopping studying was connected either to their age, or emotional well-being, or inability to focus as a result of anxieties around their immigration status. Young people from London and the South East were most likely to want to progress, and those in London had particularly high aspirations, with two thirds expressing a desire to one day attend university, even if

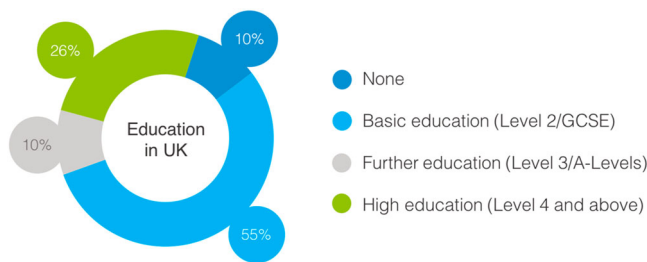


Figure 6. UK Education levels (all focus group and interview participants).

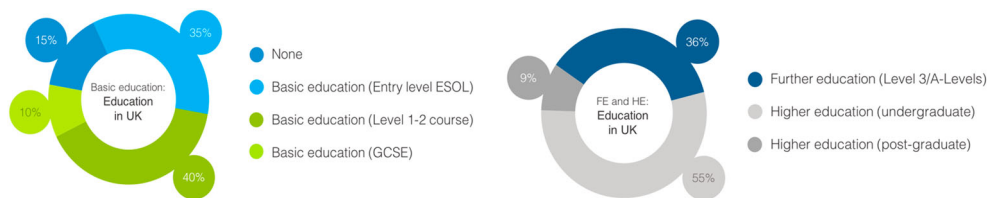


Figure 7. Type of UK education achieved by level (focus group and interview participants).

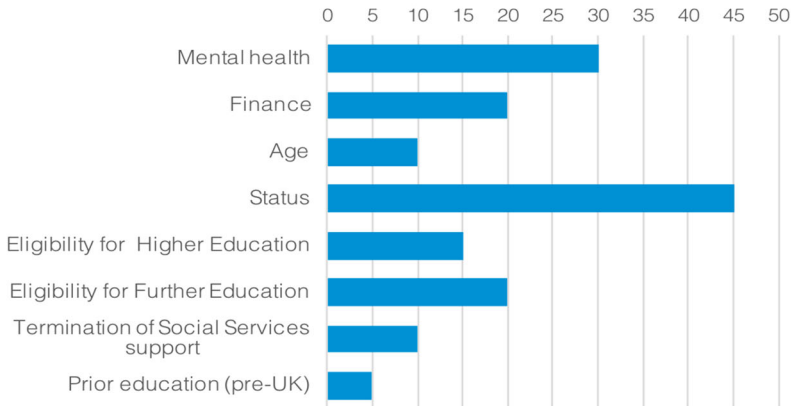
currently studying at Entry Level. Professionals suggested that this regional variation may be attributed in part to the role model affect, with several young Afghan refugees who have attended university and secured higher levels of employment well known and visible within London Afghan youth culture in particular. Although highly valued at all levels, the perceived value of education increased as more education was gained, with one young person who is studying for an undergraduate degree explaining that ‘I want to do more because I see now that the more you learn, the more you know, and the more opportunities you have’ (YPLondon2B).

Despite this enthusiasm for further study, the majority of respondents at all levels and in all regions felt that this was unlikely to be possible for them. Several key barriers to educational progression were identified (Figure 8). The three most frequently identified barriers (immigration status, mental health and finance) were consistent across all levels of achieved education, and in responses from professionals.

Amongst those with basic education, immigration status was the most frequently reported barrier to educational progression, with multiple young people explaining that ‘I don’t have the right papers’ (YPSouthEastB) and ‘if I had papers I would study more’ (YPLondon1A). After status, mental health was the next most frequently identified barrier, with young people explaining that their lives were ‘too stressful’ (YPEastMidlandsA), with ‘big pressure in my head’ (YPLondon1C). Thirdly, financial difficulties were reported as preventing young people from continuing in education, primarily because of needing to work, whether formally or informally, to support themselves or family members in Afghanistan. A fourth significant barrier at the lower level of education is eligibility for funded places at both the further and higher education level, with fee remission at the further education level becoming more complex once young people are aged 19 and over (CCLC 2017). Many young people reported challenges enrolling for fully-funded places, particularly when still asylum seekers awaiting an initial decision or having submitted a fresh claim (YPLondon2D; YPSouthEastA; YPSouthEastB; YPSouthEastF; YPEastMidlandsC).

For those wishing to study at the higher education level, eligibility for home student fees and student loans was repeatedly identified as a significant barrier to further study (YPLondon1A; YPLondon1C; YPLondon1E; YPSouthEastC). Asylum seekers, and those with Discretionary Leave are not eligible for either (Refugee Council 2017), and although a number of scholarship programmes specifically for asylum-seeking students have emerged in recent years, competition is high and the number of beneficiaries limited (RSN 2012). The majority of respondents who identified this issue as a barrier to progression were not yet studying at a level that would enable them to apply to university – yet notably this barrier affected motivation even at the lower levels of study. Some

Basic education: Barriers to further study (percent of respondents*)



*Some respondents cited more than one barrier.

FE and HE: Barriers to further study (percent of respondents)

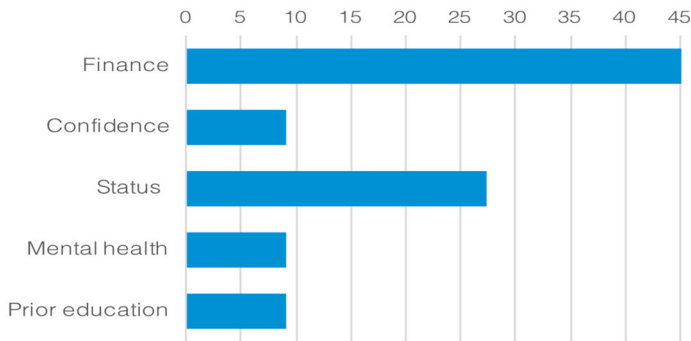


Figure 8. Barriers to educational progression by level of UK education achieved.

small regional variation was found here, with respondents in London and the South East taking a slightly more optimistic view of their chances of progression – these young people presented as more aware of scholarships and fee-waivers than those in other regions, and were more likely to have a friend who had achieved higher levels of education.

The reported barriers to educational progression also intersect, and, in most cases can ultimately be traced back to uncertain immigration status. Young people in all regions repeatedly explained that the mental health issues and financial difficulties preventing them from focusing on education have arisen as a direct result of their uncertain immigration status, and professionals emphasised the mutually reinforcing nature of the barriers young Afghans face when trying to progress beyond basic levels of education.

Although a higher proportion of those studying at further and higher levels of education have Refugee Status or Indefinite Leave to Remain, immigration status remains a progression challenge for those still seeking asylum (studying with the assistance of scholarships and fee-waivers) or with other time-limited forms of status. Mental health conditions, whilst cited as a barrier to progression by a significant minority, were not as

dominant as at the lower educational levels, and were presented as less of a challenge than financial barriers. This is perhaps explained by the higher incidence of more stable forms of immigration status at this level, and the financial challenges faced by the majority of would-be post-graduate students of all nationalities and immigration status.

Where Afghan care-leavers had been able to progress in their education, the role of significant adults proved critical, across various enabling factors identified by respondents. The most frequently cited enabling factor, whether at the basic, further, or higher level, and across all regions was school or college-based support, such as a particularly committed teacher who provided extra help or the provision of extra English as an Additional Language (EAL) classes or 1:1 support. The second most frequently identified enabling factor, again consistent across regions and educational levels, was the support provided to the young person by the Local Authority looking after them. As with the school-based support, this was often the presence of a particularly dedicated individual (social worker, key worker or leaving care personal advisor), who gave the young person time, advice, and perhaps most critically, advocated for them at key moments in their progression journey. Thirdly, support from supportive and significant adults working or volunteering for NGOs had also proved beneficial – in particular the provision of educational mentoring, advice and guidance and advocacy. The additional enabling factor of the historical presence and support of a foster carer, although not mentioned at all by young people, was repeatedly identified by professionals as a key indicator of likely educational progression amongst the Afghan care-leavers they worked with. This, it was noted, creates an advantage for those young people arriving in the UK aged 15 or younger, as those arriving aged 16 or over are not placed in foster families.

4.3. Socio-economic integration and wellbeing: the impact of education for Afghan care-leavers

4.3.1. Access to employment

Across the UK, 48% of people with no qualifications at all are in formal employment, as are 76% of those with Level 2 qualifications (ONS 2011b) and 88% of graduates (DfE 2017b).

Amongst the Afghan care leavers interviewed for this paper, formal employment levels are notably lower than national averages for people with similar level qualifications, with only 4 (20%) of those with no or basic education, and 5 (45%) of those with further and higher education working in the formal labour market (Figure 9). Obtaining a higher level

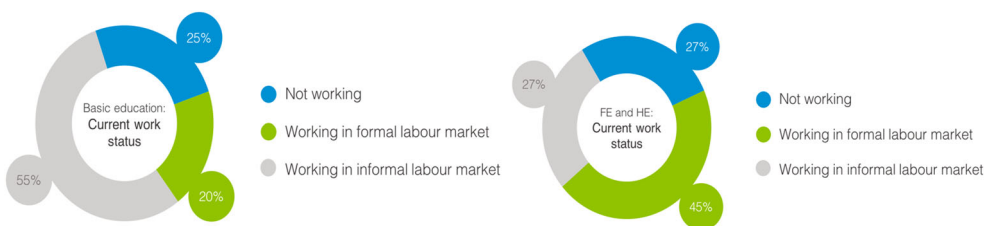


Figure 9. Current work status of Afghan care-leavers by level of UK education achieved (focus group and interview participants).

of education had little impact on the likelihood of being out of work for the Afghan-care leavers consulted, with 5 (25%) of those with no or basic education and 3 (27%) of those with further or higher education out of work.

Access to the formal labour market amongst respondents, however, did increase significantly with level of education obtained. In part this is explained by the higher frequency of immigration statuses that accord the right to work amongst the group with further and higher level education. Nonetheless, it is not entirely accounted for by this, as several respondents with the right to work in the basic education cohort reported choosing to remain in the informal labour market, despite having the right to work legally. Professionals across all three regions confirmed this, explaining that as a result of delays obtaining a status with the right to work,

they are forced to start in illegal work places to live and it becomes normal for them – the grey economy is what they’re forced into, and it’s hard for them to step out of it, even if they do get [the right to work]. (KIIEastMidlands1)

Thus, whilst not having the right to work prevents Afghan care-leavers from working legally, obtaining this right does not in isolation appear to make the formal labour market accessible for those with basic level or no qualifications. Those with higher levels of education, in contrast, appear better equipped with the critical thinking and investigative skills (commonly associated with higher levels of education) needed to navigate the transition to legal work, with two thirds of those working in the formal labour market reporting previous informal work.

Amongst Afghan care-leavers, the perception that education contributes to obtaining work increases with level of education achieved (Figure 10). Where only basic level qualifications had been achieved, over half of respondents (55%, or 10 individuals) stated that education had not or would not help them find work. The primary reason given for this was that their work responsibilities did not need any skills gained in college. This was particularly the case in the East Midlands, where the majority of respondents worked, whether formally or informally, within Afghan-run businesses where English was not spoken. Across all regions, the majority of young people with basic level qualifications reported that they did not need to write in English at work, and so the literacy skills they were gaining at college were of no interest to their employers. However, when education was perceived to have contributed to obtaining employment, it was precisely as a result of

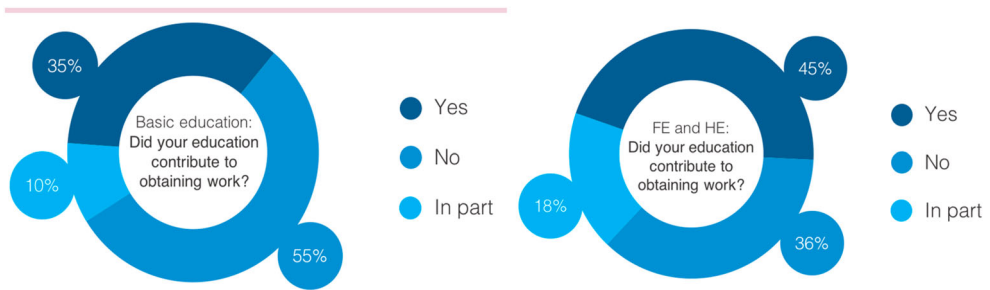


Figure 10. Perceived contribution of education to obtaining work by level of UK education achieved (focus group and interview participants).

having improved written and spoken English skills, and, in a few cases, basic numeracy. The value of education for work was felt most strongly amongst young people working in the formal labour market, who were more frequently working in roles that involved interacting with non-Afghans.

Amongst those with further or higher education qualifications, a positive correlation between education and work was more clearly articulated, with 7 respondents (63%) stating that it had at least partially contributed to them obtaining work. For those with university level education who stated that education had not helped them find work, this was linked exclusively to immigration status, and applied to those studying on scholarships or fee-waivers whilst still asylum seekers without the right to work. These young people reported working informally in order to support their education.

4.3.2. Type of work and remuneration

The majority of Afghan care-leavers with no or Entry-Level qualifications are working in unskilled manual labour, primarily in the construction industry, in scrap yards or in restaurants, for companies or establishments owned by other Afghans. Amongst those with Level 1–2 and GCSE qualifications, the type of work undertaken diversifies slightly, but remains low-skilled work on market stalls, in shops (most frequently phone shops, again owned by other Afghans, or Pakistanis) and in personal services or restaurants. Those with slightly higher level basic qualifications more frequently report undertaking roles that involve engaging with customers (Figure 11). Six (54%) of those consulted with further or higher level qualifications working in skilled roles in the public or

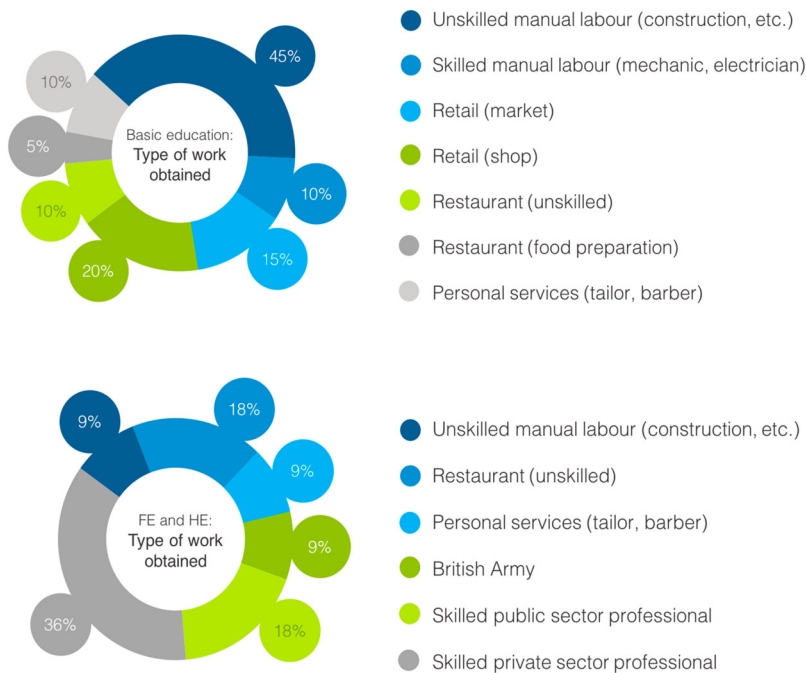


Figure 11. Type of work obtained by Afghan care-leavers by level of UK education achieved (focus group and interview participants).

private sector (compared with 65% of working age graduates in the UK as a whole) (Figure 11). Where those with, or studying for, higher education level qualifications remain working in unskilled manual labour, this is as a result of their immigration status restricting them to work within the informal economy.

The minimum wage in the UK is £7.05 per hour, and, in recognition of the higher costs of living in the capital, a London Living wage of £9.45, while not legally enforced, is recommended. Academic qualifications are broadly associated with higher pay in the UK, with average annual gross wages for young people aged 21–25 ranging from circa £14,000 for those with qualifications up to Level 2, to circa £23,000 for graduates (ONS 2013).

Although remuneration for the Afghan care-leavers consulted does improve with each level of education achieved (Figure 12), it remains significantly below the national averages, at every level of education qualification. At the basic level of education, across all regions, not a single respondent, including those working formally with GCSE (or equivalent) level qualifications was paid the UK minimum wage. Remuneration was particularly low in the East Midlands (where, as noted above, the majority of respondents are working in Afghan-run businesses where they are not expected to either write or speak English), with the level of pay most frequently cited £3 per hour. One professional from this region explained that this was often accepted by the young Afghans he knew because,

£2 or £3 an hour is a normal starting wage for informal work in this region – for those who are unskilled, illiterate ... they then gradually build up their skills and climb up the levels to £60 or even £100 a day – almost like an illegal internship. They see that there are others in the Afghan community who have done their time on low wages, and are now earning well, so they just earn their £20 a day and live on that gradually working way up ... life is hard but because of the close community they tend to get by. (KIEastMidlands1)



Figure 12. Remuneration for working Afghan care-leavers by UK level of education achieved (focus group and interview participants).

The highest paid respondents in the basic education category were those working formally, who were paid between £5.50 and £6.50 per hour. For those working informally, pay ranged from £2 per hour to £6.25 per hour. A minority of respondents, typically in the informal economy, were not paid a salary, but were paid in kind with food, travel cards and occasionally accommodation. Others in the informal economy were not paid at all, but worked nonetheless in the hope that once they had gained experience they would start to be paid. Inability to negotiate salary was repeatedly expressed by young people in London and the South East, who, despite reported dissatisfaction with their pay, said that they ‘can’t ask for a raise’ (YPLondon1A) typically because ‘there are other people he can get to do it’ (YPSouthEastB) or ‘I don’t have the papers so he can pay what he likes’ (YPLondonE). One professional in London told of a young person who was indeed fired as a result of questioning his low pay (£2 per hour) (KIILondon3), and others across all regions spoke of the power imbalance present when young people are either working informally, or working formally but with limited English, confidence or family support.

Evidence of destitution amongst young people interviewed was limited – despite the low pay, the long hours worked meant that most reported having enough money to cover food and clothes. However, professionals confirmed that most young people worked to survive, with one explaining that,

although I don’t see evidence of them destitute, or unable to buy day-to-day essentials – when it comes to the big things they are denied them – so if their ESOL course isn’t funded, or if they want to do a higher level course, they can’t do it. They are blocked at big steps in life. (KIILondon1)

This is particularly pertinent to a consideration of the long-term wellbeing and integration prospects of Afghan care-leavers. Whilst the ability to afford, in the main, day-to-day essentials may present an illusion of immediate wellbeing, this finding suggests it may mask a picture of more acute inequalities emerging cumulatively over time.

Poor conditions and treatment did however emerge as a key concern for those with basic level education across all regions. This was particularly the case for those young people working in the informal labour market. One professional explained that the young people he supported ‘get no sick pay, no time off, no choice over hours. And there are the threats – you ask for an afternoon off to do an exam, and the boss says if you do that then don’t bother coming back’ (KIIEastMidlands4).

At the further and higher education level, remuneration improves significantly for Afghan care-leavers. Though one individual was still only paid in kind, and a significant minority (3 individuals or 27%) are paid less than the UK minimum wage of £7.05 per hour, these two categories are made up entirely of those who, despite studying at a higher level, do not have the right to work and so remain in the informal economy. Amongst those with the right to work, all are paid at the minimum wage or above, with the majority paid the London Living Wage or higher (whether or not they are based in London). There is then, amongst those consulted, a significant positive correlation between level of education and salary for those with the right to work – most likely as a result of the increased ability of those with higher levels of education to transition into the formal labour market upon gaining the right to work. Nonetheless, despite a tendency towards studying high-earning degree subjects, the vast majority of

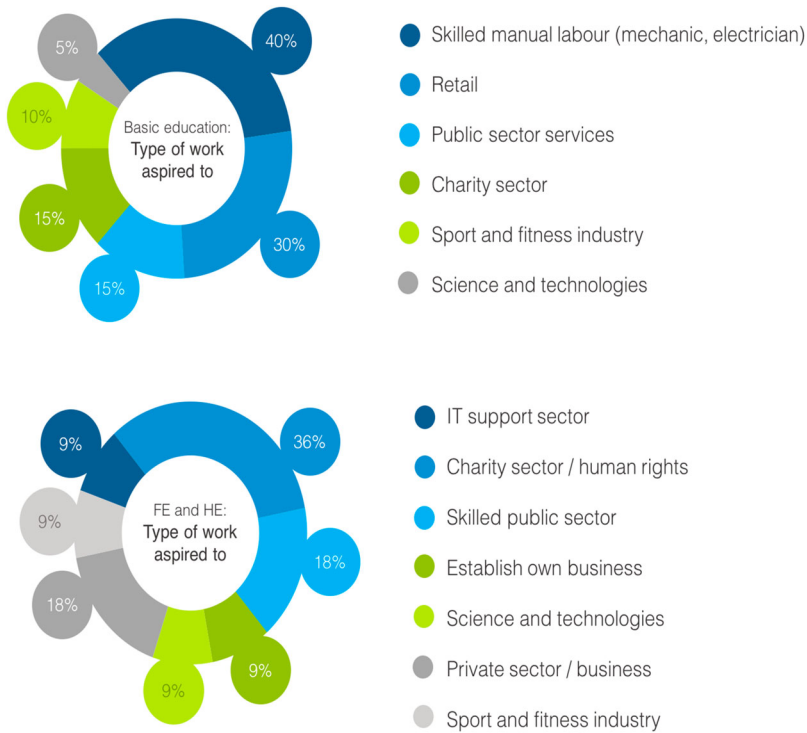


Figure 13. Labour market aspirations amongst Afghan care-leavers by level of UK education achieved.

the Afghan care-leavers consulted were still paid by the hour, with only one respondent able to report an annual salary rather than a by-the-hour rate.

Workplace conditions were also less of a concern for those educated at a higher level.

This pattern extended, though to a lesser degree, to those with further and higher level qualifications working in the informal sector. Although they, and the professionals that worked with them, spoke of long hours, low pay, and lack of flexibility regarding other appointments, young people presented as better able to negotiate the limited choices available to them within the informal market.

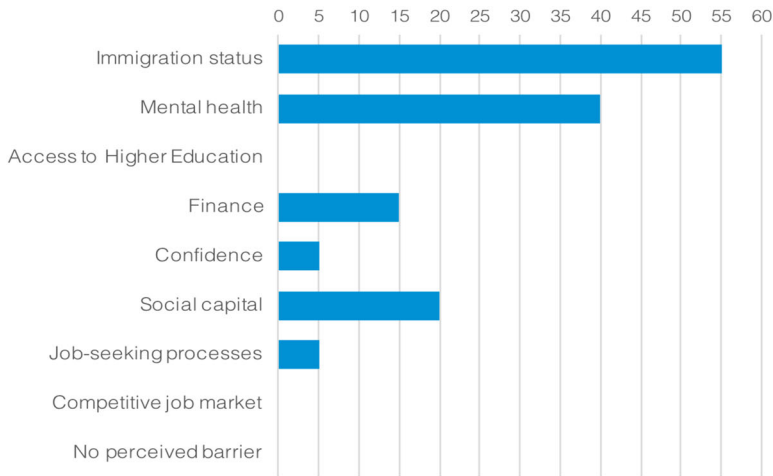
4.3.3. Future aspirations and barriers to socio-economic wellbeing

There is a notable gap between the type of work the majority of young Afghans are currently undertaking, and the type of work they wish to access, even amongst those with higher education qualifications.

At the basic education level, the majority of respondents working in unskilled manual labour aspire, in the main, simply to the skilled version of the job they are currently doing, or to be, as one young person explained ‘a boss’ in their sector – in his case, ‘a boss carpet fitter’ (YPSouthEastC). Those working on market stalls or in small shops spoke of plans to ultimately run their own business, aspiring to ‘make this business more bigger, that’s my plan’ (YPSouthEastG) or having ‘my own company or something’ (YPSouthEastB).

A significant number of young people spoke of wanting to work in either the charity or public sector. At the basic level, 5 respondents (30%) expressed this desire, and at the

Basic education: Barriers to socio-economic wellbeing (percent of respondents*)



*Some respondents cited more than one barrier.

FE and HE: Barriers to socio-economic wellbeing (percent of respondents)

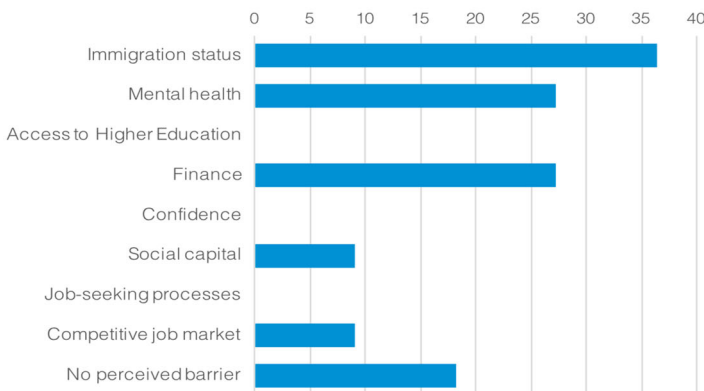


Figure 14. Perceived barriers to socio-economic progress and wellbeing amongst Afghan care-leavers by level of UK education achieved.

further and higher education levels, just over half of the young people interviewed (6 individuals or 54%) wanted to work in these sectors. Several spoke of wanting to ‘give back’ to either the UK or Afghanistan. Professionals suggested that this was perhaps a result of the high level of engagement these young people have typically had with this sector in the UK – it is therefore an area of work they understand and may have role models within (Figure 13).

Despite these aspirations and plans, the Afghan care-leavers consulted identified numerous barriers to their future socio-economic wellbeing (Figure 14). As with the barriers to educational progression, immigration status and mental health were the most frequently identified, with finance (typically to fund further study, cover business start-up costs, or afford appropriate accommodation) and a lack of social capital also notable.

Even when they held high level qualifications, the young people told that they were ‘not excited for the future, because of my lack of documents’ (YPLondon1B); that ‘with temporary status I can’t plan’ (YPLondon2C); and that

I am anxious about the future because I don’t know what will happen. If this fresh claim doesn’t go the right way the Home Office will pick you up straight away and send you back ... It is not my mental or intellectual ability, but it this artificial problem that is stopping me from progressing in life. (YPLondon1A)

For those with stable forms of immigration status, the remaining barriers identified were linked broadly to social capital, with young people lacking contacts and connections in the industries they wished to work in (the charity sector being the one exception). This limited their ability to obtain relevant work experience and summer internships, or to get reliable advice on business start-up and management.

One small group (two of those with higher and further education qualifications) stated that there was no barrier to their progress. Every individual who stated this had either completed studying or was currently studying at degree level, and had either Refugee Status or Indefinite Leave to Remain, suggesting again that it is the combination of higher level education qualifications and a stable form of status that gives Afghan care-leavers the opportunity to flourish in the UK, and not higher education alone.

5. Conclusions

The data analysed for this paper demonstrates that there is a positive correlation between higher levels of education and improved socio-economic outcomes for Afghan care-leavers across regions of England, particularly beyond basic education. These benefits notwithstanding, the deleterious impact of precarious immigration status in the lives of so many of this group limits, or in some cases entirely negates the benefits of education.

For those with stable and more permanent forms of immigration status, additional support is still needed in order to adjust for the psychological and practical impact of the years spent awaiting this. The provision of business networking opportunities to build social capital; training in entrepreneurship and start-up skills tailored to each level of education; and improved access to ongoing mental health support may begin to reduce the gap in socio-economic wellbeing between young Afghans and their peers.

However, we have demonstrated that living without stable immigration status in the UK is a key feature of the experience of Afghan care-leavers in England: a significant majority find themselves in this situation (Figure 3). There is, therefore, a notable group of young care-leavers in the UK, who, as a result of their immigration status, are not able to transition into ‘secure and settled futures’ as is hoped for care-leavers more broadly (HM Government 2014). When these young people are forcibly returned to Afghanistan after reaching 18, outcomes are poor at best, with young people facing significant violence, high levels of destitution, severe mental health difficulties and notable barriers entering any kind of education or employment (Gladwell et al. 2016). When they remain living in protracted limbo in the UK, with the formal labour market out of reach, this group of care-leavers are, and become increasingly, vulnerable to mental health issues, exploitative work conditions, and a growing sense of powerlessness and frustration – even when they have achieved high levels of education. The state also loses out:

we have seen that the majority of these young people aspire to do meaningful work, to contribute to society and, in many cases, to proactively seek work that improves the lives of others – and yet are prevented from doing so.

These findings speak to the ongoing debate emerging in the literature on refugee and migrant youth around viable durable solutions for young people who arrive in the UK and other EU nations as unaccompanied asylum seeking children and transition into adulthood with insecure immigration status (Menjívar and Perreira 2017; Humphris and Sigona 2017; Sigona, Chase, and Humphris 2017; Meloni and Chase 2017 amongst others). The present reality creates a situation where these young people are likely to remain unable to build productive futures in any context, and the efforts of NGOs and educational institutions to support them are frequently undermined.

It is beyond the scope of this article to suggest specific immigration reforms that might alleviate these challenges. However, it is clear that in an increasingly restrictive immigration policy environment, further research into actions statutory and charitable organisations might take in order to minimise harm to these young people would be useful. In particular, these findings may lead a reader to assume that the value of education for these young people is minimal where stable immigration status is not obtained – in that they are not able to convert their education into well-paid employment within the formal sector. However, the majority of young people with precarious immigration status repeatedly spoke about how important education was to them, this despite their inability to access the labour market and their uncertain futures. As the UK Home Office introduces new measures to restrict access to education for asylum seekers, those submitting fresh claims, and those who have exhausted the appeals process, further research into the non-employment related benefits of education for former UASC would be welcomed. Whilst the data collected for this article finds that immigration status is the key determiner of socioeconomic wellbeing for Afghan care-leavers, the psychosocial benefit of participating in education for former UASC and its contribution to their broader sense of belonging and wellbeing is accepted anecdotally within the refugee youth practitioner community. The study restrictions being introduced at the time of writing suggest this may now need to be examined from an evidence-based, systematic perspective if young people already prevented from accessing the formal labour market are to avoid being permanently prevented from also accessing education.

Notes

1. The UK Home Office defines unaccompanied asylum-seeking children as persons who are under 18 years of age when their asylum application is submitted; who are applying for asylum in their own right; and are separated from both parents and not being cared for by an adult who in law or by custom has responsibility to do so.
2. Although there were 740 applications for asylum made in 2016 by Afghan UASC, only 83 were recognised as refugees in the same year (Refugee Council 2017).
3. The right to work may be applied for after 12 months of waiting for an initial decision on an asylum claim – but if it is granted the right to work applies only to a list of restricted ‘shortage’ occupations that are typically highly skilled.
4. Local Authorities are entitled to refuse to provide the data requested in a Freedom of Information request if the cost of doing so would exceed £450.

5. London is divided into multiple Borough Councils, each of which is its own Local Authority, and collects data accordingly. For this reason, London, although one city, is classed as a region of the UK.
6. Note that Refugee Status has been classed as a 'stable' status despite the recently introduced possibility for return after 5 years.
7. For the purposes of this paper, Islamic education is defined as learning to read the Qur'an in Arabic.

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