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**Exploring the Impacts of the COVID-19 Crisis for the Employment Prospects
of Refugees and People Seeking Asylum in Australia**

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Exploring the Impacts of the COVID-19 Crisis for the Employment Prospects of Refugees and People Seeking Asylum in Australia

Abstract

As recent research indicates, refugees and people seeking asylum are suffering disproportionately from the COVID-19 pandemic and have become more and more 'shut out' and marginalized. An important pathway to integration and self-reliance is sustainable employment. To explore the impacts of COVID-19 on the employment prospects of refugees and people seeking asylum, we conducted 35 interviews with managers from Australian organisations that employ or assist refugees and asylum seekers in finding employment and 20 interviews with refugees and people seeking asylum. Our interviews indicate that the labour market has become more difficult for these groups in the COVID-19 era due to 1) declines in job availabilities, 2) loss of jobs, 3) increased competition in the labour market, and 4) increased discrimination and an 'Australian first' mentality. Our interviews further suggest four strategies to improve employment prospects in the current situation: 1) pathways to permanent residency and citizenship for people seeking asylum, 2) access to healthcare and a financial safety net, 3) online training and education, and 4) social procurement.

Keywords: Refugees, people seeking asylum, employment, discrimination, COVID-19, labour market, integration, inclusion

Introduction

Globally, there are currently 79.5 million displaced people including 26 million refugees (UNHCR 2020). Before COVID-19, Australia (the context of the current study) had been welcoming almost 20,000 new refugees per year (Department of Home Affairs 2020a). The participants in this study include both refugees and people seeking asylum. As defined in the 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee is ‘someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion’ (UNHCR 2021a). According to the UNHCR, a person who seeks asylum ‘is someone whose request for sanctuary has yet to be processed’ (UNHCR 2021b). Recent research suggests that refugees and people seeking asylum in Australia suffer from educational disadvantages, mental health issues, and further marginalization due to COVID-19 (Mupenzi et al. 2020; Rees & Fisher 2020). However, there is still little literature addressing the consequences of COVID-19 on their employment prospects (see for an exception about temporary migrant workers: Berg & Farbenblum 2020). We therefore explore the implications of COVID-19 for the employment prospects for refugees and people seeking asylum. We also aim to discover strategies to improve the employment prospects for refugees and people seeking asylum in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To achieve our research objectives, we conducted 35 interviews with managers from Australian organisations that employ or assist refugees and asylum seekers in finding employment and 20 interviews with refugees and people seeking asylum. In the article, we first describe the employment impacts of COVID-19 in Australia. This is followed by a review of prior research about the employment of refugees and people seeking asylum and a summary of Australia’s refugee and asylum seeker policies. After having presented the practical and theoretical foundation for our study, we proceed with the description of the current study, including the data collection and procedures, sample description, and data analysis approach. After that, we explain the main findings of our interview study that show that the labour market has become more difficult for refugees and people seeking asylum in the COVID-19 era due to 1) declines in job availabilities, 2) loss of jobs, 3) increased competition in the labour market, and 4) increased discrimination and an ‘Australian first’ mentality. Next, we explain four strategies, which we developed based on the interviews, to improve employment prospects in the current situation: 1) pathways to permanent residency and citizenship for people seeking asylum, 2) access to healthcare and a financial safety net, 3) online training and education, and 4) social procurement. Finally, we discuss our findings, relate them to prior research, and explain the practical implications.

The Employment Impacts of COVID-19 in Australia

The economy has been strongly hit by the COVID-19 crisis (Biddle et al. 2020) and many workers have suffered from financial hardship (Borland 2020). More specifically, Biddle and colleagues' report about the initial impacts of COVID-19 on the Australian economy shows that the employment rate decreased by 3.1% (from 62.0% in February 2020 to 58.9% in April 2020). The job loss is the largest among young (18-24 years) and old workers (older than 65 years). The average number of work hours declined from 35.1 to 31.1 hours per week (particularly for women and workers from non-English speaking countries) and the average household weekly income decreased by \$163 (from \$1,795 to \$1,632 after-tax).

It is important to identify the most vulnerable workers, so that they can be supported during COVID-19 and in the economic recovery. Recent research has found that COVID-19 has a detrimental effect on the labour market by increasing the unemployment rate in Australia (Government National Skills Commission 2020). Further, female employees, ethnic minorities, and young employees are more likely to lose their jobs during the current crisis (Alon et al. 2020; Berg & Farbenblum, 2020; Gould & Shierholz 2020). This is also reflected by research during previous crises (e.g., the 2008 financial crisis) which has shown that young employees are often the first ones who are laid off, because they are more often on fixed-term contracts and/or have just recently joined the organization (Verick 2009).

Prior research (Antonopoulos 2009; Hoyes et al. 2012) also suggests that the gender segregation of occupations determines which gender loses out during economic crises. However, not much is known about the effect of COVID-19 on the job prospects of refugees and people seeking asylum. Here, we analyse the impact of COVID-19 on different, often neglected minority groups, refugees and people seeking asylum. Refugees and people seeking asylum are vulnerable workers and could be highly exposed because they are often employed in precarious jobs and industries that are particularly hit by COVID-19 (e.g., construction, retail, taxi driving, and hospitality).

Prior Research About the Employment of Refugees and People Seeking Asylum

Previous research has identified high unemployment rates for people seeking asylum and refugees when compared to Australians and other migrant groups (e.g., Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2006, 2007; Udah, Singh & Chamberlain 2019; Van Kooy & Bowman 2019). This high unemployment rate has been also reported internationally (e.g., Ivlevs & Veliziotis

2018; Lumley-Sapanski 2019; Ruiz & Vargas-Silva 2017; Smyth & Kum, 2010). Academic work has also identified barriers that people from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds face when seeking work (Lee, Szkudlarek, Nguyen, & Nardon 2020; Newman et al. 2018). Specifically, refugees face substantial barriers to employment, such as discrimination (Hugo 2014), uncertain political and economic status in the host country (Akkaymak 2017; Pajic et al. 2018), and precarious legal status (Jackson & Bauder 2014; Fleay, Lumbus, & Hartley 2016). They also tend to suffer from being underpaid and/or being employed below their skills and work experience, because their home country educational degrees and qualifications are not accepted by their host country (Akkaymak 2017; Pietka-Nykaza 2015; Fleay et al. 2016; Smyth & Kum 2010; Vinokurov et al. 2017). Because of unemployment and the difficulty of finding jobs, they may lose their self-esteem, motivation, and develop a feeling of despair and betrayal (Willot & Stevenson 2013).

Further, previous research has reported that refugees and people seeking asylum have not only poorer health outcomes (physical as well as mental health) but also more issues in understanding and engaging in the healthcare system (Baranik, Hurst, & Eby 2019; Becker & Ferrara 2019; Chin & Cortes 2015; Giuntella et al. 2016; Hartley & Fleay 2014; Hebbani & Khawaja 2019). These health issues are likely to make it more difficult for them to find work and to work effectively, leading to a need for greater employment support. Refugees lose a considerable portion of their social and cultural capital when they leave their country of origin (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al. 2019). Finally, some refugees have experienced traumatic events such as armed conflicts and persecution in their home country (Chin & Cortes 2015). All these conditions potentially lead to a greater need of support for a successful integration in the workplace.

As potential solutions for the employment issues of refugees and people seeking asylum, previous research has concluded that generic support (e.g., support that does not recognise the specific challenges facing asylum seekers and refugees) in the voluntary sector is not enough and that more targeted employment support, in which professional bodies are engaged, is needed (Brown & Scribner 2014; Delaporte & Piracha 2018; Kosny, Yanar, & Begum 2019; Koyama 2015; Lee et al. 2020; Willot & Stevenson 2013). Importantly, the solutions to the employment obstacles faced by refugees and asylum seekers require factoring in the specific legal and institutional context where such strategies may be implemented.

Australia's Refugee and Asylum Seeker Policy

COVID-19 and Employment of Refugees

There are two sub-programs under Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program—the onshore protection program and the offshore resettlement program. The onshore protection visa is available to people seeking asylum who have arrived in Australia with a valid visa (e.g., student or tourist visa). People arrived in Australia by boat or without a valid visa have been excluded from this program since September 2013. The offshore resettlement program contains three categories – Refugee, Humanitarian and Community Support Program or CSP (Department of Home Affairs – Australian Government 2020a). People living in other countries identified as refugees by UNHCR and who are referred to Australia for resettlement fall into the Refugee category. The Special Humanitarian Category is for the people subject to substantial discrimination in their home country and are proposed for the visa by an individual or an organisation in Australia. The CSP which started in July 2017, is a program enabling refugees to resettle in Australia with individuals, community groups, or businesses. The annual limit is of 1,000 CSP places included in the total intake by Australia (Andrew & Renata Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law 2019a).

Those who arrived in Australia without a valid visa are referred as the “illegal maritime arrivals” and “unauthorised air arrivals” by the Australian government and they are not allowed to apply for permanent protection in Australia. What they can apply for is a “three-year Temporary Protection Visa” or TPV or a “five-year Safe Haven Enterprise Visa” or SHEV. Such visa holders are permitted to work and study in Australia, however once the visa lapses, they must re-apply (Andrew & Renata Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law 2019b).

In 2019-2020, 70,621 persons lodged an application for an offshore humanitarian visa. While for 2019-2020 Australia's annual Humanitarian Program was set at 18,750 places, with a minimum 17,100 places for the offshore component of the program, but due to COVID-driven restrictions on visa granting, the granting of all Class XB (offshore) Humanitarian visas was suspended on 19 March 2020. As a result, only 13,171 resettlement visas in total were granted, comprising of 11,521 offshore humanitarian visas, inclusive of 6,422 Refugee category visas, 5,099 Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) visas, and 1,650 permanent Protection visas (Department of Home Affairs – Australian Government 2020b).

People in Australia, waiting to have their asylum case decided, do not have automatic access to government services like Centrelink or Medicare. Many of them are not allowed to work. For those struggling to survive, the only assistance available to them is the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS), which provides modest income support, trauma support services, and medical care (Department of Home Affairs – Australian Government 2020c). In

2018, there were 13,299 people supported by the SRSS. 28% of these were under 15 years old. As of 2019, the government has cut the budget for SRSS by 60%. As many as 8,000 people may be cut off SRSS support due to these cuts (Asylum Seeker Resource Centre 2019).

The Current Study

This study seeks to, first, understand the complexity of the impact of COVID-19 on the employment pathways of refugees and asylum seekers and, second, to provide more specific recommendations for employment support for them based on the survey of experiences of employers, managers and refugees and asylum seekers. To contribute to this research, we address in this study the current employment environment, which has changed due to COVID-19 for people seeking asylum and refugees. Through a qualitative interview study, we aim to show not only the impacts of COVID-19 on refugees and people seeking asylum but also how the government as well as employers and organisations assisting these groups can best support refugees and people seeking asylum in the integration process. The interview study builds on previous research to improve the knowledge base about how the employment prospects for refugees and people seeking asylum can be improved in a crisis.

Methods

Data collection and procedures

Before conducting the interviews, we first received ethics approval from the first two authors' university's human research ethics committee. Their university is one of the largest Australian universities and requires researchers to go through a rigorous process to receive ethics approval for their research. This was particularly important for our study, because refugees and people seeking asylum are considered a vulnerable group and they might be concerned that their application for asylum could be affected by their participation in our study. To mitigate these concerns, we guaranteed confidentiality and that the participants' names, their co-workers' names, their managers' names, and their organisations' names would not be published. Further, we only report aggregated demographic statistics and findings (see Table 2) to ensure the anonymity of the study participants.

After having received ethics approval, we conducted 35 interviews with managers from Australian organisations that employ or assist refugees and people seeking asylum in finding employment and 20 interviews with refugees and people seeking asylum. This study used semi-structured interviews, which allowed the researcher to follow up on ideas raised by

the participants (Olson 2016). The semi-structured model is better suited than more structured interviews, in which responses are limited to the questions, and unstructured interviews, which allow wide-ranging discussion but can limit the relevance of the responses (Olson 2016). Semi-structured interviews maintain relevance but allow flexibility to further explore important experiences and ideas (Bennich-Bjorkman 2007).

The interviews started with questions about the background and job of the respondents as well as questions about their organization and recruitment strategy. As part of general questions about the recruitment, selection and integration of refugees and people seeking asylum, we asked the interview partners several questions about the impact of COVID-19 on refugees and people seeking asylum (see Appendix for the list of questions used in the semi-structured interviews). As common in interview studies, we conducted interviews until a theoretical saturation was reached.

Participants and sampling

To get a comprehensive picture of the employment prospects of refugees, we interviewed managers working in different organizations and different industries (i.e., construction, community health, banking and finance, state and local government, and community service organisations/NGOs). All were Australian citizens and were employed at the time. The refugees and people seeking asylum we interviewed were either employed or looking for work in different industries (i.e., banking and finance, warehousing, administration, community service organisations/NGOs, higher education, construction, and retail). All interview partners lived in the state of Victoria, Australia. The sample was characterized by age and gender diversity. The age of the interview partners ranged from 18 years to 65 years. For the managers, 20 interviewees were female. For the refugees, 7 interviewees were female. Please see Tables 1 and 2 for more information.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

Most of the interview partners were selected or recommended by non-for-profit organizations that support refugees in Australia, followed by snowball sampling. We also asked our personal contacts, who worked for social enterprises, to recommend suitable interview partners. We then follow up with emails to these contacts. This approach was often more effective than contacting without any mutual connections or a previous relationship. The interviews were conducted between July and November 2020. All interviews were recorded. Due to COVID-19, we conducted all interviews through Zoom.

Data Analysis

To analyse the interview data, we first transcribed all interviews that we conducted. The transcription was done with the help of the transcription services offered by Zoom and Otter. Two authors went through the interview transcripts to verify that the software correctly transcribed the interviews and made any necessary changes to match the original recording. After that, two authors coded in NVivo the interview transcripts to identify the impacts of COVID-19 on refugees and people seeking asylum. This means all sentences and paragraphs in the interview transcripts were highlighted and commented on if they were about COVID-19 and its influence on refugees and people seeking asylum. After that, the authors checked each other's comments and discussed and clarified them. This led to the key categories that summarize the key impacts of COVID-19 on refugees and people seeking asylum and their labour market opportunities including: 1) declines in job availabilities, 2) more competition in the labour market, 3) lack of government support, 4) increased discrimination and an 'Australian first' mentality (Figure 1).

Further, we explored the strategies that the interview partners proposed to improve employment prospects in the current situation, the authors agreed on the following four categories: 1) pathways to permanent residency and citizenship for people seeking asylum, 2) access to healthcare and a financial safety net, 3) online training and education, and 4) social procurement. Finally, to better relate our interview findings to recent research about employment equity (i.e., Sojo, Wood, Wood, & Wheeler 2016), we organised the proposed strategies to enhance employment opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers into three categories: 1) equal opportunity, 2) supply-side and 3) demand-side strategies. Examples of anonymous quotes from the interviewees are given below. To guarantee the anonymity of the interviewees, we do not use any names and abbreviations to avoid the possibility to recognize the identity of any interviewee.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Employment Issues for Refugees Caused by COVID-19

Declines in job availabilities

Most supervisors and those assisting refugees and asylum seekers find work (25 managers in total) argue that the labour market has become more difficult for refugees and people seeking in the COVID-19 era due to declines in job availabilities. The interviews

suggest that refugees and people seeking asylum are particularly exposed to the decline in job availabilities. Our research is in line with other studies (e.g., Carlsson & Rooth 2016; Vinokourov et al. 2017) that provide evidence that refugees and people seeking asylum are often used as an employment buffer, meaning that they are employed when the economy is booming, but laid off or ignored in recruitment processes when jobs are rare. For example, one manager who works in construction explained that:

“We haven't planned any additional recruitment during the time of this current COVID outbreak [...] I know overall, there's definitely been a drop in the number of vacancies being advertised across the market. I think refugees will be lost in that potentially, there's a lot of people out of work at the moment.”

Further, one participant who assists refugees to find work in community health stated that:

“a whole host of organizations I was working closely in mid to late March got in touch with me and said, hey, look still keen to work with you, But everything's on hold for now.”

A local government employee, who supervises employees with a refugee background, also said that:

“We had somebody [from a refugee background] in the leisure team and of course, all the gyms and pools were shut down. So, there was no work for them to do. And all of the Leisure centre staff were stood down or placed on pause.”

In addition, the interviews suggest that many refugees and people seeking asylum seem to be employed as labourers in construction, retail, gastronomy, community work, and hospitality (see also Riosea & De Maio 2017). These industries have been strongly affected by the COVID-19 lockdowns and unemployment in these sectors is likely to increase in the next months (Borland 2020). For instance, one refugee participant, who was on the search for jobs, explains that while there are jobs in the health sector, other opportunities, such as in the community sector (in particular those that require face to face interaction), have disappeared:

“Since COVID, applying for jobs has become harder. You don't get to see opportunities. The only opportunities were in the health sector. As a support worker, the jobs in that sector increased. But jobs working in the community, there were very few jobs.”

Finally, the interviews indicate that refugees and people seeking asylum are more likely to work in casual jobs. These jobs have less job security, making it easy for employers to terminate the employment during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, due to the lack of jobs and increased competition, this can make it difficult to find another job, further increasing the job insecurity of these employees. For instance, one refugee participant, who works in a warehouse, raised their concern that while they are lucky to have part-time work during COVID-19, they are very worried about the potential to find a new job:

“It has been really hard to get a job. And I'm thinking the same thing now. If I lose my job due to COVID-19 it would be really hard for me to get back into the job market.”

More competition in the labour market

The second main finding is that refugees and people seeking asylum face increased competition in the labour market, which was referred to by 22 of the interviewed managers and those assisting refugees and asylum seekers to find work. During the COVID-19 crisis, fewer jobs are advertised, and many jobseekers seem willing to take on less attractive jobs, thus increasing competition for such jobs in which a relatively high rate of refugees is employed. For instance, one interviewee who works for a community organisation and helps refugees find employment explained the reality for refugees in a poor labour market:

“Where there's a really high degree of competition for jobs and lots of more capable recently unemployed job seekers, the refugee candidate is going to end up going to the bottom of the pile.”

In a competitive labour market, the interviewees further suggest that refugees and people seeking asylum often lose out due to having less Australian work experience, less employment networks and unrecognised qualifications (see also De Vroome & van Tubergen 2010; Fozdar & Torezani 2008; Wood et al. 2019). For instance, one employer we

interviewed who works in the community sector stated that this problem is particularly acute in white-collar industries, even when refugees and asylum seekers are highly skilled:

“the competition for jobs has really skyrocketed. When I first started working here, graduates could easily get positions. Now that people are coming through the doors with PhDs, the general competition for jobs means that looking for white collar and professional jobs is really hard.”

Similarly, a refugee who works in higher education explains that finding work in Australia has always been difficult without local connections and local work experience, but this has been exacerbated in COVID-19 due to more job competition and limited opportunities to build connections. As they state that:

“You need a lot of local experience here in Australia. Secondly, there is a lot of networking here in Australia to get a job, you need to be within the circle... I haven't been able to have all of those networks. So that has been another challenge [to find work].”

Lack of Government support

The third main finding is that refugees and people seeking asylum do not get enough government support during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Sixteen interviewees emphasized that asylum seekers living in the community on temporary protection visas or bridging visas are not eligible for JobSeeker or JobKeeper payments (see also Spinks 2020). Consequently, this financial hardship has increased demand on charities for assistance. As an example, one interviewee who assists refugees with financial and employment support discussed the challenges of supporting refugees due to a lack of financial support:

“Anyone on a bridging visa does not receive anything, they are not eligible for JobKeeper or JobSeeker. So, we've had a lot of people that have been self-sustaining for many years coming back to us for assistance.”

Another interviewee who assists refugees with settlement and employment discussed the challenges of supporting refugees due to not being able to access permanent residency (see also Fleay et al. 2013):

“We only deal with people seeking asylum. So that, in itself, is a barrier for people because as soon as an employer sees that people aren't permanent residents, they are overlooked.”

As another consequence of the lack of financial support was mentioned that employers are less likely to keep on temporary visa holders without access to JobKeeper. Refugees with permanent visas can access JobSeeker and JobKeeper payments that can reduce their financial hardship. However, asylum seekers living in the community on temporary protection visas or bridging visas are not eligible for JobSeeker or JobKeeper payments (Spinks 2020). Without access to JobKeeper, employers are less likely to keep on temporary visa holders. In addition, this financial hardship has increased demand on charities for assistance (Stayner 2020).

Discrimination and an ‘Australian first’ mentality

21 interviewees suggest that COVID-19 may have led to discrimination against refugees and people seeking asylum and that the widespread economic damage is not evenly felt. The disparate effect can be explained in part by some form of in-group favouritism and out-group derogation (Fiske & Lee 2008), whereby asylum seekers and refugees are perceived as outsiders and de-prioritise in recruitment and selection processes. For example, a manager who assists refugees and people seeking asylum argued that they suffered from bias:

“I think it has disadvantaged refugees even more because there’s been a lot of job cuts, and people have this ‘look after Australians first.’[sic] But people from refugee backgrounds are Australians and we should include refugees as Australians in the response to COVID. This mentality has disadvantaged people from refugee backgrounds even more in finding a job in this current environment.”

An interviewee who works on assisting organisations with social procurement to increase hiring of refugees and asylum seekers argued that there was widespread discrimination in the labour market:

“We found that quite a lot of people from the CALD community couldn't get jobs, irrespective of their experience and qualifications, because of cultural

issues, I would say, inherent racism in society. We had a woman from China who had led a quite a large organization in China who was working in a local fish and chip shop. Now, we had this guy from Iraq who could not get a look in because I think people assumed that he was from Iraq, and he was a terrorist.”

Another interviewee who works for a not-for-profit assisting young people and refugees find work stated that:

“I think the media at the moment is not doing refugees any help with some of the narratives that are coming in about refugees and asylum seekers. There's this fear that they're going to take jobs off local Australians.”

This is in line with previous research that has reported the importance of media messages for occupational opportunities available to refugees and asylum seekers (Mayne, Lowrie, & Wilson 2016; Mayne-Davis, Wilson, & Lowrie 2020). This interviewee believes that there is a direct connection between the inflammatory media reporting and direct discrimination in the labour market, which makes it harder for young people from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds to find work and a preference for ‘locals’ that has become even more dominant during COVID.

“a lot of the young people that we engage through the projects, that we have in our organisation, the number one experience is experiences of racism and discrimination is huge. Not only are they facing cultural and ethnic discrimination, but also geographic discrimination. So, a lot of employees if they say they're from the west, or they've gotten like a name like Mohamed and western suburbs in their address. So, it's these barriers upon barriers that are mounting up against them.”

Discrimination on the basis of post codes and ethnic background (inferred via last names) has been recognised as an issue in the Australian community (Stratemeyer et al. 2018) Another participant who works for a local council and who supports refugees to find work argues that there is direct discrimination against people with non-Anglo names and thus refugees from CALD backgrounds:

“We know that race-based discrimination happens, and to be honest it's probably even more common than it's given recognition. I wouldn't doubt in any way that people who apply for jobs at my council would have experienced that. I do know in working with our industry partners as well that we've heard from employers that they would see names on a resume and then they would make an association between that name and a particular background. Then rather than read the resume, they would put it in the no pile immediately and we've heard that quite directly.”

An interviewee who assists refugees to find employment explains that refugees and asylum seekers can internalise the discrimination, where they lose confidence if they are continuously rejected for jobs they apply for:

“Sometimes, young people come to me say ‘I've applied for so many jobs and haven't got any’ and I would ask them, why do you think that is? Sometimes they could be like because I don't have a car or work experience. And there has been sometimes where they have said ‘I know it is because they see my name, and they just don't want to be associated with my address’.”

As the evidence above has shown, there is some basis to this frustration. Further, this belief that they will suffer from discrimination means that refugees may cease to seek out certain jobs as they believe they will just be rejected. One interviewee who assists refugees and asylum seekers to find work stated that:

“They don't see themselves being able to access these jobs. So, they don't even try in the first place.”

Strategies to Improve Job Prospects of Refugees and People Seeking Asylum

Sending asylum seekers and refugees into further poverty would not only endanger their inclusion but also threaten social cohesion in Australia. Considering the job market crash and limited job availabilities (Biddle et al. 2020; Borland 2020), how can government policies ensure a successful integration in the labour market and create a path to self-reliance? Based on the analysis of our interviews, the authors identified four strategies that the interview partners proposed: 1) pathways to permanent residency and citizenship for people

seeking asylum, 2) access to healthcare and a financial safety net, 3) online training and education, and 4) social procurement.

To better relate these strategies to recent research, we adopted the diversity management framework proposed by Sojo and colleagues (2016) to organise the proposed strategies to enhance employment opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers into three categories: 1) equal opportunity: legislation and organisational policies that forbid discrimination against people who belong to protected social categories (includes the strategies of creating pathways to permanent residency and citizenship for people seeking asylum and providing access to healthcare and a financial safety net), 2) supply-side strategies: also called opportunity enhancement strategies, are efforts developed to increase the supply of qualified or job-ready candidates from a specific social group (includes the strategy of providing online training and education), and 3) demand-side strategies: efforts to create a job-market demand for workers who belong to protected social categories (includes the strategy of implementing social procurement).

Equal opportunity

Our findings pointed at two potential strategies to equalise the rights and employment opportunities of asylum seekers and refugees. First, the interviewees suggested that the Australian government could offer now more pathways to permanent residency and citizenship for asylum seekers on temporary protection visas (see also Bloemraad 2018). This would assist to find work as many employers do not offer employment to those without permanent residency, but also ensure greater economic security as temporary visa holders are denied access to income support. At the same time, this may help Australian businesses to compensate the loss of migrant workers due to COVID-19.

Second, the government should also provide a financial safety net, such as JobSeeker and JobKeeper (Whiteford, 2020) and access to Medicare to those on temporary visas. Access to JobKeeper will reduce the asylum seekers will be dismissed from employment, avoiding the potential negative consequences to their well-being associated with unemployment (Sojo & Guarino 2011). JobSeeker would provide a financial safety net reducing the likelihood of asylum seekers being thrown into poverty, which might hinder the health (Taylor-Robinson, Barr, & Whitehead 2019) and prospects of entering employment (Canduela, Lindsay, Raeside, & Graham 2015) of individuals and their descendants (Duncan, Kalil & Ziol-Guest 2013). Access to Medicare should also help protect the physical and mental well-being of asylum seekers in temporary visas.

Supply-side strategy

Considering the increased competition in the labour market, it is important that refugees and people seeking asylum undergo reskilling processes to improve their employability (Gowan 2012). Three interviewees stated that their organisations have shifted to online training. For instance, one local government employer stated that their employees from refugee backgrounds have easily moved to online work, learning and onboarding:

“The refugee employees that are currently continuing have adapted really quickly to doing work from home. And yet we do Teams and utilize technology.”

Public funding for online training is vital for Vocational Education and Training (VET) to improve the employability skills of refugees and people seeking asylum during the COVID-19-era (Molla 2020). Training and education are also opportunity enhancement interventions that can both increase employment capabilities and prevent backlash against the social group benefitting from them (Harrison, Kravitz, Mayer, Leslie, & Lev-Arey, 2006).

Demand-side strategy

Finally, seven interviewees referred to social procurement, which was the most common policy response raised by the interviewed participants to improve employment prospects. According to the Victorian Government, this is a practice when organisations and government ‘use their buying power to generate social value above and beyond the value of the goods, services, or construction being procured’ (Victorian Government 2020). As an example, in the construction industry, Loosemore (2016) explains that social procurement may mean ‘requiring subcontractors and suppliers [in contracts] to not only deliver traditional products and services but to also provide employment opportunities for disadvantaged and marginalised groups such as the disabled, ex-offenders, ethnic minorities or the long-term unemployed.’ In practice, this means that when governments or other organisations purchase services, fund projects, and directly employ staff, a designated number or proportion of employees must come from specific groups, such as refugees, to improve their employment opportunities. The social benefits can be greater labour market participation, leading to improved skills, improved economic security and social inclusion amongst the participants, and more broadly creating more workplace diversity and improving environmental sustainability. It can also provide better quality jobs with more secure contracts and better pay and conditions, which can have positive impacts across industries, where the government only provides contracts to employers that uphold such standards (Victorian Government

2020). One interviewee from an NGO who assists refugees to find employment took a positive approach and argued that:

“Social procurement is a way of positively discriminating to prioritize those people who are most disadvantaged into these meaningful jobs. Social procurement has this enormous opportunity to affect refugee and asylum seekers [...] It is such a big and easy policy lever to pull for the government to be able to actually provide meaningful, long term sustainable jobs for refugees and asylum seekers.”

Further, one participant who works for a training organisation promoted the benefits of social procurement:

“Social procurement is a significant opportunity... It's only a government thing. But it flows through to the private sector by default because they've got to deliver the outcome. So that's really working across buyers to be more prescriptive about the outcomes that they would like projects to deliver. If you're working in a local council, for example, you should be prioritising people from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds because there's significant populations in this council area.”

The Victorian Government has a Social Procurement Framework that aims to insert clauses in contracts with the private sector, such as through infrastructure spending, to produce inclusive economic and employment outcomes (EPIC Program 2020). An example is the EPIC Program, which is an 18-month cadetship for refugee and asylum seeker engineers working on major infrastructure projects, such as the Level Crossing Removal Project, with 30 cadets currently participating in the program (EPIC Program 2020). The cadets receive on-job training, support and mentoring plus an accredited Graduate Certificate in Infrastructure Engineering qualification. This type of program aims to overcome employment barriers for highly skilled refugees who already have engineering degrees but are struggling to find work in this field in Australia. This positive example demonstrates the potential for social procurement to play an important role in producing employment outcomes for refugees in Australia.

Discussion

By conducting 35 interviews with managers and 20 interviews with refugees and people seeking asylum, we explored the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the employment prospects for refugees and people seeking asylum. The analysis of the interviews indicates a detrimental impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the current and future employment for refugees and people seeking asylum. Most interview partners were pessimistic about the current and future situation for these groups and think that more support from government and not-for-profit organisations is needed to tackle this issue. The Australian government is spending billions of dollars to prevent the collapse of the Australian labour market and help workers who suffer from financial hardship. It is their responsibility that significant support is provided to the most vulnerable, disadvantaged, marginalised, and discriminated groups.

Previous research before COVID-19 has shown that refugees face several barriers in the labour market due to discrimination, language and cultural differences, legal work rights, and non-recognition of educational degrees and work experience (Fleay et al. 2016; Ivlevs & Veliziotis 2018; Lee et al. 2020; Newman et al. 2018). We contribute to this research stream by showing that COVID-19 has worsened the employment situation for refugees and people seeking asylum and has created new employment barriers for them. While COVID-19 had detrimental impacts on the general labour market (Biddle et al. 2020; Borland 2020; Government National Skills Commission 2020), the interviews indicate that the impacts are not evenly felt and that refugees and people seeking asylum suffer more from the decline in job availabilities.

Further, refugees and people seeking asylum are often employed in precarious jobs (Riosea & De Maio 2017). This job uncertainty becomes particularly detrimental during a crisis, in which organisations often lay-off workers. The decline in job availabilities and the loss of jobs in the labour market further increases the competition in the labour market. This means the number of job applicants increases, whereas the number of job advertisements decreases. In such a context, refugees and people seeking asylum are more likely to compete for jobs with Australians who are prioritized for several reasons, including having permanent work rights (relevant to asylum seekers), more local work experience, larger employment and social networks and outright discrimination. Finally, the analysis of the interviews suggests that COVID-19 has to an extent created an 'Australian first' mentality that may have led to increased discrimination against refugees and people seeking asylum. In such a crisis context, it seems to be that the interests of minority groups are neglected and put behind the interests and needs of the majority group.

To improve the employment situation for refugees and people seeking asylum, research before COVID-19 identified several solutions that required more employment support from government and non-for-profit organisations (Holbrook 2019; Lee et al. 2020; Senthana, MacEachen, Premji, & Bigelow 2020). This support includes the provision of language training, job readiness training, and workshops about cultural differences and communication (Kosny et al. 2020). Through our interview study, we contribute to this research stream by identifying four additional strategies that may help to improve the current employment situation.

One promising solution might be social procurement, which would increase the incentives for organisations to hire cultural minority employees. Additional strategies, which could dampen the current COVID-19 impact, include easier pathways to permanent residency and citizenship for people seeking asylum and online training and education. Finally, it is crucial to provide access to healthcare and a financial safety net. It seems paradoxical that people seeking asylum often have limited access to healthcare, although some of them suffer from severe traumatic experiences and their negative consequences (Baranik et al. 2018; Becker & Ferrara 2019; Hartley & Fleay 2014; Hebbani & Khawaja 2019). Better healthcare support is also likely to increase not only the health of people seeking asylum but also their job prospects in the long term.

Regarding the contribution to Australia's society and economy, refugees and people seeking asylum are a potentially untapped asset for the Australian economy. Before COVID-19, in Australia, 92.81%, 82.18, and 75.64% of "humanitarian migrants" were unemployed at 6 months, 1 year, and 2 years respectively, with 73.69% of those employed after 2 years either being under- or over-educated for their position, primarily over-educated (Delaporte & Piracha, 2018). To address some of the current shortage of workers in a few professions, organisations could hire people seeking asylum if they obtained the required work rights. Additionally, recent refugees to Australia are often employed in "secondary labour market" and low status and low paying jobs that are avoided by Australians, regardless of educational level and work experience, due to a non-recognition of degrees and qualifications (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2006). By better integrating refugees to Australia in the labour market there is the potential to benefit from their incoming work knowledge, skills, and experience.

Many refugees and people seeking asylum already provide or will provide important contributions to the society (Hartley & Fleay 2016). For example, many refugees are employed in healthcare and aged care and currently risk their physical health in the workplace (Ortiga & Macabasag 2020). In the past century, Australia has welcomed more

than 900,000 refugees, contributing to Australia's multicultural society from which we all benefit today. Many countries (e.g., Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Ethiopia, Greece, Italy, Malaysia, and USA) have scaled back or stopped their humanitarian visa programs. Refugees are more likely to be hit by the current pandemic and to suffer from a lack of healthcare support, poor living conditions in refugee camps, and loss of jobs. This dire situation highlights the importance to continue and expand settlement programs. Taking leadership in the settlement of refugees may also improve a country's international standing and even lead to economic benefits (e.g., increased trade with the host countries of refugees (White & Tadesse 2010) or through trade liberalization for countries that take on refugees (Kirişci 2020).

Regarding future research, researchers can adopt an international perspective and analyse the situation of refugees and people seeking asylum in different countries. COVID-19 has placed significant barriers on refugees and people seeking asylum. Many countries have shut their international borders to and non-permanent residents. As the borders are closed to all but citizens and permanent residents, there are limited pathways for refugees and people seeking to travel to other countries. In Australia, for example, the granting of offshore humanitarian visas was suspended on 19 March 2020 (Spinks 2020). Another issue is that places of detention are vulnerable to potential COVID-19 outbreaks, especially due to the difficulty of social distancing (Vogl & Methven 2020; Spinks 2020).

Further, future research can build on our interview study and analyse if the impacts of COVID-19 have not only short-term but also long-term consequences on the employment situation of refugees and people seeking asylum and whether these effects are felt equally across refugees and people seeking (e.g., depending on country of origin, age, gender). It would be also useful to generalise our findings through a survey study (see as an example Berg & Farbenblum 2020). In this paper, we identified several strategies to overcome some of the current employment issues for refugees and people seeking asylum. To test the effectiveness of these strategies, future research can conduct field experiments in collaboration with government and not-for-profit organisations.

In this study, we focused on the strategies that are driven by government organisations. Future research can expand this approach and take the perspective of businesses and employers and analyse whether and how they can contribute to improve the job prospects for refugees and people seeking asylum. Another avenue for future research is to identify the strengths and potential contributions that refugees and people seeking asylum can make to Australian businesses and society. Most previous research applied a rather

pessimistic perspective by focusing on the problems and challenges that refugees and people seeking asylum experience. Consequently, organisations often start the integration of refugees and people seeking asylum with the assumption that they need to “manage” the refugee problem.

A final recommendation for future research is the analysis of organisations that support and provide employment assistance to refugees and people seeking asylum. As most previous research has focused on individual refugees and their challenges or on government organisations, a research gap exists regarding the analysis of employment support programs from NGOs. For example, researchers could collaborate with these NGOs in order to develop best practices of employment support programs.

Conclusion

The current study evaluated the impact of COVID-19 on the employment pathways for asylum seekers and refugees in Australia, from the point of view of the organisations looking for workers or providing employment services. Our findings indicate worsening employment prospects for people seeking asylum and refugees in Australia driven by the loss of jobs in the labour market, increased competition for jobs, lack of government support, and increased in-group favouritism. We proposed a set of structural and institutional equal opportunity, supply-side and demand-side strategies that can be a starting point to improve the employment prospects of this population.

Adopting these strategies will facilitate the integration of refugees and people seeking asylum in the workplace and society. This is likely to increase the financial and psychological well-being of refugees and people seeking asylum as well as their identification with Australia. Further, they will be able to contribute with their skills and experience to Australia's economy and society. For example, organizations, which create a more diverse and inclusive work environment, will be more likely to benefit from the skills of refugees and people seeking asylum. These employees may feel more motivated, empowered, and confident to contribute their skills and knowledge to achieve their organization's mission and objectives. This may in turn lead to an increase in organizational creativity, innovation, and performance.

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Table 1: Characteristics of Managers

Sex	Age	Industry	Organisational tenure (years)	experience with managing refugees or providing support services from a NFP (if different from organisational tenure)	Direct supervision of refugees / asylum seekers?
F	40-50	Victorian Government	3-4 years		YES
M	30-40	Victorian Government	2-3 years		YES
M	30-40	Victorian Government	9 years		YES
F	50-60	Community Health	8 years		YES
M	40-50	Community Health	5-10 years		YES
M	30-40	NFP	>10		YES
M	30-40	NFP	>10	Research-focused role about the integration of refugees	YES
F	30-40	Banking/ Finance	>10	1-2 years of managing refugees	YES
F	30-40	NFP	5 years		YES
M	25-30	NFP	6 years (5-10)		YES
F	20-30	NFP	3-4 years		YES
F	30-40	NFP	2-3 years		YES
F	30-40	Banking/ Finance	5-10 years	2 years managing refugees	YES

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F	25-30	Social Enterprise	3-4 years		YES
M	30-40	Local Government	8 years	4-5 years (working on the integration of refugees into workplaces)	NO (supporting the integration of refugees into workplace)
M	40-50	Private Consulting	2-3 years		NO (consulting support for organisations to integrate refugees)
F	30-40	Social Enterprise	5- 6 years		YES
F	50-60	NFP	>10 years		YES
F	30-40	Local Government	3-5 years		YES
F	30-40	Business association	2 years		YES
M	50-60	Local Government	2-3 years		YES
M	30-40	Social Enterprise	2-3 years		YES
F	50-60	NFP	>10 years		YES
F	30-40	Community Health	1-2 years		YES
F	60-70	NFP	4-5 years		YES
M	30-40	Higher Education	4-5 years	1 year	YES
M	50-60	Higher Education	7-8 years	2 years	YES
F	30-40	Victorian Government	3-4 years	1 year	YES
M	40-50	Higher Education	4-5 years	1 year	YES
F	40-50	NFP	4-5 years		YES
F	40-50	NFP	3-4 years		YES
F	30-40	Local Government	4-5 years		YES

Table 2: Characteristics of Refugees and People Seeking Asylum

Sex	Male 80%	Female 20%			
Lost job due to COVID-19 pandemic	Yes 10%	No 90%			
Visa status	Citizen 45%	Bridging visa 50%	Student visa 5%		
Highest level of Education	Year 12 20%	Bachelor 65%	Masters 15%		
Employment status	Casual 25%	Short-term contract 15%	Full time 45%	Unemployed 15%	
Age	18-30 15%	31-40 50%	41-50 25%	51-60 5%	61-70 5%

COVID-19 and Employment of Refugees

Industry using ANZSIC codes¹	8511 General Practice Medical Services	8102 Higher Education	6931 Legal Services	5309 Warehousing and Storage Services	879 Other Social Assistance Services	4511 Cafes, Restaurants and Takeaway Food Services	8601 Aged Care Residential Services	6221 Banking	6932 Accounting Services	6940 Advertising Services		
	5%	15%	5%	15%	20%	5%	20%	5%	5%	5%		
Country of birth	Afghanistan	Pakistan	Ethiopia	Cameroon	Iraq	Somalia	Fiji	Rwanda	Bangladesh	Uganda	Egypt	
	10%	5%	5%	15%	10%	5%	10%	10%	10%	10%	5%	
Employment experience²	General practitioner	Engineering	Administration	Lawyer	Social work	Hospitality	Aged Care worker	Banking	Accountant	Communi-cations	University academic	Warehouse labouring
	5%	15%	5%	5%	20%	5%	15%	5%	5%	5%	10%	15%

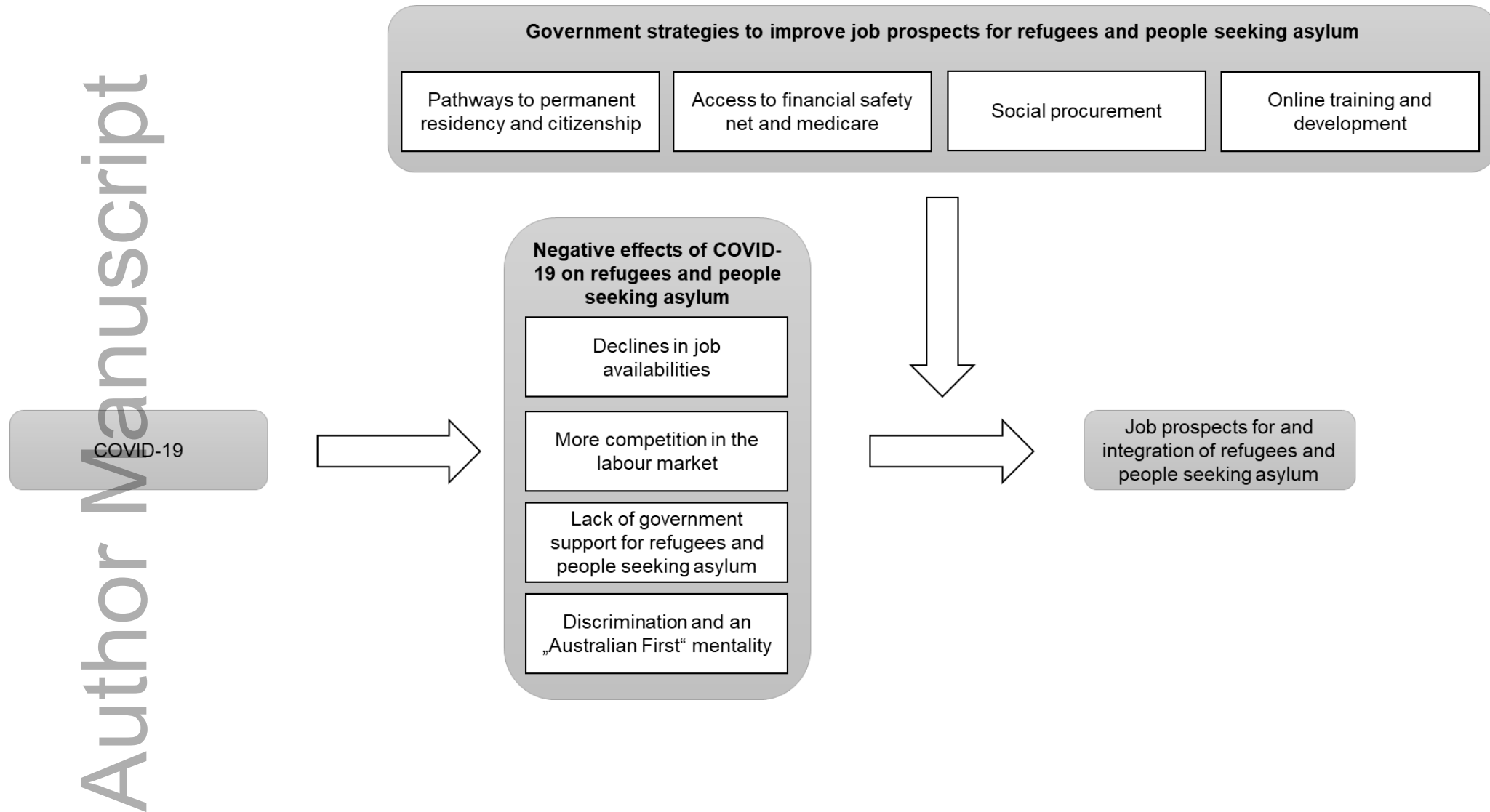
Note. Total refugee and asylum seeker interview participants N=20. ANZSIC = Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification.

¹ ANZSIC = Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification. Note that many of the participants have worked in different sectors.

² Note that many of the participants have worked in different sectors.

FIGURE 1

A model of the COVID-19 impact on the job prospects of refugees and people seeking asylum



APPENDIX

Interview questions for managers about the impact of COVID-19 on the employment prospects of refugees and people seeking asylum:

- How has COVID-19 influenced the recruitment of refugees and people seeking asylum?
- Has COVID-19 shaped the onboarding and integration of refugees and asylum seekers in your workplace?
- How has COVID-19 affected refugees and people seeking asylum in your workplace?
- Was the impact of COVID-19 different on refugees and people seeking asylum than on other workers?
- How has your organisation supported refugees and people seeking asylum during the current COVID-19 crisis?
- How have refugees and people seeking asylum coped with the current crisis?
- What is your organisation's future strategy regarding the employment of refugees and asylum seekers in the employment sector?
- Are you actively trying to employ more individuals with these backgrounds – why/why not?
- Finally, we gave the interviewees the possibility to provide their comments and ideas that were not captured through the interview questions.

Interview questions for employed refugees and people seeking asylum about the impact of COVID-19 on their employment prospects:

- How has COVID-19 shaped your experiences in your current job?
- Can you work from home?
- Are you able to get the support you need at home?
- What challenges are there due to COVID for you at work?
- Are you concerned about job security?

Interview questions for unemployed refugees and people seeking asylum about the impact of COVID-19 on their employment prospects:

- How has COVID-19 shaped your experiences in looking for work?
- Has anything changed due to COVID-19 for you regarding the job search?
- Did anything become more difficult?

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