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Rebuilding professional identity in a new language

Understanding the experiences and needs of refugee and asylum seeker healthcare professionals in the UK

Dr. Brigita Séguis,

Head of Impact Evaluation,
Cambridge University Press &
Assessment



Research findings on experiences of refugee and asylum-seeking healthcare professionals entering the NHS

As of March 2021, the UK's National Health Service (NHS) employed over 190,000 international healthcare professionals, including at least 2,000 individuals who arrived as refugees or asylum seekers. While these professionals bring valuable skills and experience, their transition into NHS roles is often shaped by complex registration processes and a range of personal and systemic challenges.

Key Findings

Nearly **1,000** OET Pulse and over **160** OET Tests have been donated to date to UK-based refugee agencies supporting refugee doctors and nurses, including REACHE, Talent Beyond Boundaries, the Lincolnshire Refugee Doctor Project and Belfast City of Sanctuary.

50 free Evolve Digital course tokens have been donated to Breaking Barriers to support refugee professionals in finding meaningful employment. These include engineers, lecturers and healthcare workers who have come to the UK from **14** different countries

Our evaluation

In September 2024, we published the findings of an evaluation study focusing on the language learning and test preparation experiences of refugee and asylum seeker healthcare professionals as they seek to re-enter employment in the UK.

Participants for the study were recruited via two UK-based charities: RefuAid and NHS Refugee Support Programme. Seventy-four doctors, 30 nurses and two midwives completed our online questionnaire, representing 22 different countries. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three nurses, nine doctors and two English language teachers working with refugee students.

The evaluation explored participants' pathways into the NHS, the barriers they face during this transition, the challenges encountered once employed, and the kinds of support that could ease both entry and integration. The study offers a detailed view of the resilience and determination required to navigate these pathways.

Our findings

English language proficiency emerged as the main and most consistent challenge reported by the participants, with 50% identifying it as their primary barrier. We explored this issue further in interviews with students and teachers, which revealed that refugee and asylum seeker healthcare professionals face a mix of practical, technological and psycho-social challenges as they work to re-establish their careers in the UK.

A key practical barrier was limited access to English language and test preparation classes, particularly for individuals living outside designated catchment areas. Participants felt that, given the predominantly online mode of delivery, these restrictions were unnecessary and created avoidable obstacles.

"They straightforwardly first ask "where is your location?". Once you tell them that, "I'm living in Bristol," [they say] "unfortunately, we won't be able to help you." Even with the virtual classes, what offers they can do, just nothing. So that was really unfair, for me, that everything was in London".

Doctor

Technology-related difficulties were also common: many learners experienced unstable broadband or lacked access to laptops, often linked to insecure housing conditions, with few available support schemes to mitigate these issues.

"[...] quite often, people don't have a functioning laptop, and they're trying to access the class on an iPad or a phone, and they need to not only be able to join the Zoom lessons, but we use Google Classroom as well as a repository for materials, and quite often, it just doesn't have the functionality to be able to use that mechanism properly".

Doctor

Psycho-social factors further affected learners' progress. Many participants described low confidence, test anxiety and the emotional impact of repeated exam failures, compounded by experiences of displacement and deprofessionalisation. Some also reported mental health challenges, including symptoms of depression and trauma, which affected attendance and concentration.

"I'm losing my spirit at the moment. The major problem with surgery is that the surgeons are losing skills. This is the major issue. If you are a trained surgeon and you are not doing surgeries that knowledge goes. This is my fourth year out of surgery."

Doctor

Teachers highlighted the value of trauma-informed approaches in creating safe and supportive classrooms, for example setting predictable routines and achievable goals, allowing learners to opt out of activities that feel uncomfortable, and being mindful of potentially triggering themes such as family, home or past life. Although common in ELT textbooks, these themes can be distressing for many refugee and asylum seeker students.

Our impact

Our evaluation findings are contributing to a growing understanding of how skilled individuals from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds navigate professional re-entry. It highlights areas where more responsive and targeted support could make a meaningful difference. For example, facilitating access to laptops and data SIM cards would ensure better and more equitable outcomes for refugee learners. Additionally, embedding trauma-informed English language teaching practices would help many refugee and vulnerable adult learners to engage more fully in the classroom.

Our findings and recommendations were presented at a recent workshop with NHS and government stakeholders to inform the Pathways for Refugee and Asylum Seeker Healthcare Professionals.



Presenting the research findings at the Refugee and Asylum Seeker Stakeholder Workshop, led by NHS England

Reference

This summary is based on the following study carried out by the Impact Evaluation team at Cambridge English:

Séguis, B., Goldstone, J., & Phandit, N. (2025). *Understanding the Needs of Adult Learners: an impact evaluation study of adult ESL programs in Florida and California*. Impact Evaluation Report.

Contact

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