

Access to the labour market as a ‘pull factor’ for asylum seekers: What the research shows

Summary

Academics at the University of Warwick have been researching the UK policy framework for asylum seekers right to work as part of a large study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council 2015-2018ⁱ.

We have found that since 2002 (when the right to work was taken away) one main argument has been made by politicians and Home Office spokespeople against giving asylum seekers the right to work: that labour market access acts as a pull factor for asylum applicants. No evidence has been presented to support this assertion.

In response to this finding we have undertaken a systematic review of research into the relationship between labour market access for asylum seekers and the numbers of asylum applications received.


Not one study reviewed has found a long term correlation between labour market access and destination choice.

We conclude that opening up access to the labour market in line with the minimum standards contained in the EU reception conditions directive is unlikely to have any long term impact upon the number of asylum applications received by the UK.

Background

The Immigration Bill will shortly be debated in the House of Commons. One of the amendments which was passed at the Committee Stage in the Lords was that asylum seekers will be permitted to take up employment if they have been waiting for 6 months or more for a decision on their application for asylumⁱⁱ. Currently, asylum seekers must wait 12 months before they can apply for the right to work, and if granted they are then restricted to jobs on the ‘Shortage Occupations List’. This list is extremely restrictive (example jobs are international ballerina and nuclear medicine technologistⁱⁱⁱ) and so the shortage occupation list rule effectively bans most asylum seekers from working in the UK^{iv}.

The work ban was brought in in 2002 and for the past year researchers at the University of Warwick have been analysing the political debate on this policy. We have found that one single



justification has dominated discussion on this policy every time that opening up access to the labour market to asylum seekers has been debated in the Commons, the Lords, and in the media. Ministers in the government in power and Home Office spokespeople have repeatedly, for 13 years, given the same reason: if asylum seekers are given the right to work, more asylum seekers will choose the UK as a destination country. However, we have been unable to identify any instances of politicians or others presenting evidence to support this claim. This briefing note looks at the evidence.

Work as a pull factor for asylum seekers –what does the evidence say?


At the University of Warwick we have undertaken a systematic review^v of research undertaken since 1997 looking at the factors determining asylum destination country. Eleven of these studies are qualitative (they involve interviewing asylum seekers), eighteen of these studies are quantitative (they use large scale datasets of country of origin and destination) and one used both statistical and interview data^v. Some of the statistical studies are global, some are Europe wide and some look just at the UK.

The first thing to note about research on this topic is that it is tremendously difficult to isolate variables such as labour market access, and be certain that this policy was the reason for an increase or decrease in numbers of applications. Asylum seekers are a legally defined category of people, not a homogenous ethnic, religious or national group. The countries of origin of asylum seekers and therefore the routes they follow to Europe, their access to resources including information on destination countries, the language they speak, and their capacity to actually exercise choice in seeking refuge changes with every new flow of forced migrants. Though it may be possible to identify correlations between numbers of applications and public policy measures at a particular point in time, such snapshots are both simplifications of extremely complex social, economic and political phenomena, and are quickly out of date. Policy change can only be determined to be a causal factor when the policies of other countries remain the same, and even then different asylum seeker nationalities or language groups may or may not respond in the same way to policy change.

Because of this complexity it is extremely difficult for researchers to identify a single variable which acts as the primary ‘pull’. This suggests that the insistence of the UK government that labour market access acts as a pull factor is not grounded by evidence.

Despite the difficulties of identifying single variables, when multiple studies using different data come to the same conclusion, we can have more confidence in their findings. Our review has found that:

- No research study has found a long term correlation between labour market access and destination choice^{vii}.



➤ The most up to date research concludes that access to work has little, if any, effect on variations in asylum applications^{viii}

Awareness of UK policy before arriving

The qualitative studies, which involve interviewing asylum seekers, are instructive in gaining a better understanding of the knowledge held by asylum seekers of UK public policy before they arrived. In all of these studies, including one conducted for the Home Office in 2002, asylum seekers have reported having no knowledge of UK public policy, including labour market access and welfare benefits, before arriving^{ix}. Most, if not all, are from countries without a welfare state, assume they will be expected to work, and report being shocked and confused when they found they would be prevented from doing so^x. These studies are mostly small scale, though all studies in a range of locations and with different nationalities report the same findings, adding weight to their conclusions.

Do countries which allow asylum seekers to access the labour market attract more asylum applicants?

No. We have ranked European countries according to labour market access for asylum seekers and then compared the number of asylum applications received for each country. There is no clear correlation between labour market access and numbers of asylum applications^{xi} as the graph below indicates.

Why? Because many complex factors are involved in the migration journeys of asylum seekers, they do not have perfect access to all information, and their choices are not made solely on the basis of potential economic benefit.

The UK, having opted out of the Recast European Reception Conditions Directive in 2008, is the only European country to deny access to the labour market. Access to the labour market is granted immediately in Sweden and Greece, after 4 months in Belgium^{xii} and 9 months in France. The variation in numbers of applications in these countries does not correlate with labour market access^{xiii}.

Within a constrained set of options the main pull factors for asylum seekers choosing the UK^{xiv}, according to the available data, are:

1. The presence of family and friends in destination country (they want to be near familiar people)^{xv}
2. The language spoken in the destination country (privileging countries with a familiar language)^{xvi}
3. A belief that the destination country respects human rights and the rule of law in general^{xvii}

4. Colonial ties between country of origin and destination –which is clearly related to the first 3 pull factors^{xviii}

As numerous academic researchers have noted^{xix}, the main pulls are not factors which lend themselves to public policy interventions.

Once asylum seekers have arrived in Europe a further factor noted by a number of researchers as being significant for destination choice within the region is the ‘recognition rate’ in a destination country -the chance of having one’s asylum application granted^{xx}. This can influence the decision making of asylum seekers where they are able to access this data. Such information however, often obtained through social networks, may or may not be reliable, and is unlikely to include a ‘rational’ and comprehensive comparison of all EU countries^{xxi}.


Does labour market access for asylum seekers encourage economic migrants to apply for asylum?

There is no research explicitly focusing on so called ‘bogus’ asylum seekers. However, the statistical research discussed above, which finds no long term correlation between labour market access and numbers of applications, looks at total numbers of asylum applications and does therefore capture the full range of types of applicants.

It is the availability of work which attracts low skilled economic migrants and in the absence of a visa, it is easier to stay hidden illegally than to apply for asylum and become visible to the authorities. Asylum seekers in the UK are finger printed, issued with a biometric ID card, required to present at a reporting centre on a weekly basis, and are liable to detention. Applicants with little legitimate claim for asylum are more liable to be detained and their chance of deportation is greatly increased. Applying for asylum would therefore put such individual’s migration-for-work project in grave jeopardy. The availability of work in the informal economy may therefore be a greater attraction to people who have no legitimate claim for asylum than formal labour market access for those awaiting a decision on their claim.

Prospects for labour market participation of asylum seekers

Labour market participation amongst asylum seekers is likely to be low for some groups. Indeed, the experience of other countries, notably Sweden (on which there is a large body of research) where there are no restrictions on asylum seekers’ working, suggests that even where asylum seekers are granted the right to work, labour market participation is low for the low- or unskilled and low- or uneducated^{xxii}. There are multiple barriers for asylum seekers and refugees entering employment including mental and physical health problems resulting from trauma, language ability (particularly language specific to particular professions), qualification (non)recognition, and discrimination on the part of employers^{xxiii}. It is likely that those who will benefit most from labour market access will be proficient English speakers with high levels of education who are able to get their qualifications recognised in the UK, such as medical professionals. For those



with poor English language ability and low skill levels entering the labour market will be challenging.

However, for those able to enter the labour market as asylum seekers the research suggests that their ability to find work and avoid welfare dependency if granted leave to remain will be greatly increased. Long term unemployment and the associated mental health implications while awaiting a decision on an asylum application have been consistently found to hamper refugee integration^{xxiv}.

Policy Recommendations

On the basis of available evidence we conclude that opening up access to the labour market in line with the minimum standards contained in the EU reception conditions directive is unlikely to have any impact upon the number of asylum applications received by the UK.

We recommend that asylum seekers be granted unrestricted access to the labour market if they have been waiting for 6 months or more for a decision on their application for asylum.

ⁱ Asylumwelfarework.com

ⁱⁱ List of amendments, the relevant amendment is No.57:
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/lbill/2015-2016/0096/amend/ml096-l-Rev.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ See the list here:
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/308513/short_ageoccupationlistapril14.pdf

^{iv} See Gower, M. (2016) Should asylum seekers have unrestricted rights to work in the UK? House of Commons Library Briefing Paper Number 1908, 11 March 2016

^v Search strategy and selection criteria: Scopus, Social Sciences Citation Index, Sociological Abstracts, Worldwide Political Science Abstracts, Directory of Open Access Journals, JSTOR Archival Journals, Science Citation Index Expanded, Taylor & Francis, Informa, SciVerse ScienceDirect, ASSIA: Applied Social Science Index and Abstracts, Oxford Journals (Oxford University Press), Wiley Online Library, Index (Web of Science), Sage Publications (CrossRef), Social Services Abstracts, PILOTS: Published International Literature on Traumatic Stress, SAGE Journals and BMJ Journals were systematically searched for studies of factors that affect refugee flight and destination choice from January 1997 to March 2016. Terms that describe asylum seekers “asylum” “forced migra*” “refugee” were combined with “push” “pull” “flight” “destination” “choice”. Inclusion criteria included peer review, publication date, data about refugee flight or destination choice and English language. There was no minimum sample size. Multiple studies undertaken by the same researcher using the same dataset were included. 2,007 articles were identified through database searches. Duplicates were removed from the list and summaries reviewed for the remaining articles based on inclusion criteria.

^{vi} In alphabetical order by first author:

Brekke, J-P. Aarset, F.M. (2009) Why Norway? Understanding Asylum Destinations, Institute for Social Research, Oslo

Castles, S. Loughna, S. 2003 Trends in Asylum Migration to Industrialized Countries: 1990-2001, United Nations University Discussion Paper No. 2003/31

Crawley, H. (2010). Chance or Choice? Understanding why Asylum Seekers Come to the UK, London: Refugee Council.

Davenport, Christina A., Moore, Will H. Poe, S.C. (2003), “Sometimes You Just Have to Leave”: Domestic Threats and Forced Migration, 1964– 1989, *International Interactions*, 29: 27–55.

Day, K. White, P. (2002) Choice or circumstance: The UK as the location of asylum applications by Bosnian and Somali refugees. *GeoJournal* 56(1): 15–26.

Doyle, L. (2009). “I hate being idle” Wasted skills and enforced dependence among Zimbabwean asylum seekers in the UK, London: Refugee Council

Gilbert, A. Koser, K. (2006) Coming to the UK: what do asylum seekers know about the UK before arrival? *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 32(7): 1209-1225

Hatton, T. J. (2004), Seeking Asylum in Europe: Trends and policies in the OECD, *Economic Policy*, 38: 5–62.

Hatton, T.J. (2009) The Rise and Fall of Asylum: What Happened and Why? *The Economic Journal*, 119(535):183-213

Havinga, T. and A. Böcker (1999). Country of asylum by choice or by chance, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 25(1): 43-61

Holzer, T. Schneider, G. Widmer, T. (2000) The Impact of Legislative Deterrence Measures on the Number of Asylum Seekers in Switzerland (1986-1995), *International Migration Review*, 34(4):1182–216

Keogh, G. (2013) Modelling asylum migration pull-force factors in the EU-15, *The Economic and Social Review* 44(3): 371–399.

Liebling, H. Burke, S. Goodman, S. Zasada, D. (2014). Understanding the experiences of asylum seekers. *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care*, 10(4): 207 – 219.

Middleton, D. (2005). Why asylum seekers seek refuge in particular destination countries. *Global Migration Perspectives Working Paper 34*. Geneva, GCIM.

Moore, W. Shellman, S (2004) Fear of persecution. *Journal of conflict resolution* 48(5): 723-745

Moore, W.H. Shellman, S.M. (2007), Whither Will They Go? A Global Study of Refugees' Destinations, 1965–1995, *International Studies Quarterly*, 51: 811–834.

Neumayer, E. (2004) Asylum Destination Choice: What Makes some West European Countries More Attractive than Others? *European Union Politics*, 5:155–80.

Neumayer, E. (2005) Bogus refugees? The determinants of asylum migration to western Europe, *International Studies Quarterly*, 49(3):389– 409.

Robinson, V. Sergott, J. (2002). Understanding the decision making of asylum seekers, *Home Office Research Study 243*. London: Home Office.

Thielemann, E.R. (2003) Does policy matter? On Governments attempts to control unwanted migration, *IIS Discussion Paper 9*, Dublin: Institute for Internal Integration Studies

Thielemann, E.R. (2004) Asylum Destination Choice What Makes Some West European Countries More Attractive Than Others? *European Union Politics*, 5(2):155-180

Thomas, S. Nafees B. Bhugra D. (2003). 'I was running away from death' – the pre-flight experiences of unaccompanied asylum seeking children in the UK. *Child: Care, Health & Development*, 30(2): 113 – 122.

Toshkov, D. (2014) The dynamic relationship between asylum applications and recognition rates in Europe (1987–2010). *European Union Politics* 15(2): 192–214.

Valenta, M. (2014) The Nexus of Asylum Seeker Migrations and Asylum Policy: Longitudinal Analysis of Migration Trends in Norway, *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, 21:371-394

Valenta, M. Thorshaug, K. (2012) Asylum seekers' perspectives on work and proof of identity: the Norwegian experience, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 31(2):76–97

Valenta, M. Thorshaug, K. (2013) Restrictions on right to work for asylum seekers: the case of the Scandinavian countries, Great Britain, and the Netherlands, *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, 20(3):459–482

Valenta, M. Zuparic-Iljic, D. Vidovic, T. (2015) The Reluctant Asylum-Seekers: Migrants at the Southeastern Frontiers of the European Migration System, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 34 (3): 95-113

van Wijk, J. (2010) Luanda – Holanda: Irregular Migration from Angola to the Netherlands, *International Migration*, 48(2):1–30

Vogler, M. Rotte, R. (2000), The effects of development on migration: Theoretical issues and new empirical evidence, *Journal of Population Economics*, 13:485–508.

^{vii} One study, by Eiko Thielmann, published in 2004 (see above for full reference) using data covering 1985-1999 did find a correlation between labour market access and numbers of asylum applications. However, the effect was found to be short term: restricting labour market access only suppressed applications for a very short time, for up to one year, after which restrictions on labour market access ceased to have any effect.

^{viii} Brekke & Aarset (2009); Valenta & Thorshaug (2012); Valenta & Thorshaug (2013); Valenta et al (2015)

^{ix} Robinson and Sergott (2002); Day & White (2002); Thomas et al. (2003); Gilbert & Koser (2006); Crawley (2010); Valenta & Thorshaug (2012); Liebling et al (2014).

^x See Doyle, 2009; See also Gilbert, A. and K. Koser (2006). Coming to the UK: what do asylum seekers know about the UK before arrival? *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 32(7): 1209-1225

^{xi} For this ranking we used data from the 2016 OECD report 'Making Integration Work: Refugees and others in need of protection' (OECD Publishing: Paris). Countries were ranked from those with no restrictions on working, to the UK with an almost complete ban on working. The numbers of asylum applications lodged in European countries in 2014 (the most recent year for which data is available) using data from Eurostat were then plotted against this ranking.

^{xii} See OECD (2016) Making Integration Work: Refugees and Others in Need to Protection, OECD: Paris, for a clear overview

^{xiii} For a comparison of the Scandinavian countries, Great Britain, and the Netherlands using similar methods see Valenta & Thorshaug (2013). This study finds that policies relating to labour market access for asylum seekers have little to no effect on numbers of applications. See also Valenta (2014).

^{xiv} Different countries are thought to have different pull factors and the idea of looking at the same pull factors across multiple countries simultaneously has been criticised, see Toshkov (2014); Keogh (2013).

^{xv} Havinga & Böcker (1999); Robinson and Sergott (2002); Castles & Loughna (2003); Davenport et al. (2003); Neumayer (2004); Hatton (2004); Neumayer (2005); Thiellemann (2004); Moore and Shellman (2004); Hatton (2009); van Wijk (2010); Moore and Shellman (2012); Keogh (2013)

^{xvi} Havinga & Böcker (1999); Robinson & Sergott (2002); Day and White (2002); Castles & Loughna (2003); Neumayer (2004); Hatton (2004); Moore and Shellman (2007); Crawley (2010)

^{xvii} Havinga & Böcker (1999); Robinson and Sergott (2002); Day and White (2002); Castles & Loughna (2003); Neumayer (2004); Thiellemann (2004); Gilbert and Koser (2006); Moore and Shellman (2007); van Wijk (2010); Crawley (2010); Toshkov (2014); Liebling (2014); Valenta (2015); see also Zetter, R., Griffiths, D., Ferretti, S. and Pearl, M. (2003) An Assessment of the Impact of Asylum Policies in Europe 1990- 2000, Home Office Research Study 259

^{xviii} Havinga & Böcker (1999); Robinson and Sergott (2002); Day and White (2002); Castles & Loughna (2003); Hatton (2004); Neumayer (2004); Middleton (2005); Crawley (2010)

^{xix} Examples from the studies in our review include: Robinson and Sergott (2002); Thielmann (2004); Crawley (2010); Valenta (2014)


^{xx} Havinga & Böcker (1999) found that recognition rates matter for some nationalities of asylum seekers in some host country contexts; also Holzer (2000); Hatton (2004, 2009); Neumayer (2005); Keogh (2013); Toshkov (2014); see also Vink, M. Meijerink, V. (2003) Asylum applications and recognition rates in EU member states, 1982–2001: A quantitative analysis', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 16(3):297–315

^{xxi} Crawley (2010); Valenta (2014); An additional piece of research which looks at social networks is: Koser, K., & Pinkerton, C. (2002). *The Social Networks of Asylum Seekers and the Dissemination of Information about Countries of Asylum*. London: Home Office.

^{xxii} See, for example, Dahlstedt, I. Bevelander, P. (2010) General versus vocational education and employment integration of immigrants in Sweden, *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies*, 8(2):158-192; Bevelander, P. (2011) The employment integration of resettled refugees, asylum claimants, and family reunion migrants in Sweden, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 30(1):22-43

^{xxiii} See Bloch, A. (2009) Refugees in the UK labour market: The conflict between economic integration and policy-led labour market restriction, *Journal of Social Policy*, 37:21-36; Phillimore, J. Goodson, L. (2006) Problem or Opportunity? Asylum Seekers, Refugees, Employment and Social Exclusion in Deprived Urban Areas, *Urban Studies*, 43(10):1715-1736; Lewis, H. Dwyer, P. Hodkinson, S. Waite, L. (2015) Hyper- precarious lives: Migrants, work and forced labour in the Global North, *Progress in Human Geography*, 39(5): 580-600

^{xxiv} See references in endnote xv plus a comprehensive review is contained in Allsopp, J. Sigona, N. Phillimore, J. (2014) Poverty among refugees and asylum seekers in the UK: An evidence and policy review, IRIS working paper series NO. 1/2014, available at



<http://www.survivorsoftorturefund.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/University-of-Birmingham-Report.pdf>