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# A temporal perspective on refugee employment – Advancing HRM theory and practice

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# **A temporal perspective on refugee employment – advancing HRM theory and practice**

## **Abstract**

As the number of refugees worldwide continues to increase, Human Resource Management (HRM) scholars and practitioners have an opportunity to rethink their role in advancing workforce integration for this highly vulnerable group of jobseekers. In this introduction to a special issue on refugee workforce integration, we argue that in order to promote comprehensive and sustainable solutions, scholars and practitioners alike need to understand refugee employment as a long-term undertaking. We propose a four-phase temporal model of refugee workforce integration, highlighting the potential role of HRM at the various stages of the integration process. We identify practical recommendations for HRM professionals to consider and several areas for future research in support of evidence-based solutions. While our paper focuses specifically on refugee employment, we argue that temporality should be considered by all HRM scholars working within the domain of global mobility.

## **Keywords**

Refugees, Temporality, Global Mobility, Immigration, Labour Market Mobility, Diversity, Migrant Worker, Review

## **Practitioner notes**

### **What is currently known?**

- Refugee workforce integration is one of the world's most urgent grand challenges. Human Resource Management can play an active role in contributing tangible solutions.
- Despite the complexity of refugee employment transitions, securing the first job in the resettlement country and subsequent workplace integration became the primary focus of extant research.
- Human Resource (HR) managers lack understanding of the refugee experience, which influences refugees' employment transitions.

### **What this study adds?**

- We propose a four-phase model that schematically represents refugees' resettlement experience and parallel workforce integration concerns.
- We demonstrate that refugee workforce integration is a lengthy process that starts before resettlement and continues past the first job placement.
- While our model introduces four distinctive resettlement phases, we argue that sustainable solutions need to adopt a holistic approach to managing refugees' career journeys over an extended period.
- The temporal perspective we advance is relevant to all globally mobile individuals and should be given more consideration by both HRM theory and practice.

### **Implications for practitioners:**

- HR practitioners can play an active role in refugee workforce integration at all four stages of the resettlement journey.
- HR practitioners are reminded to be sensitive to the vastly different lived experiences of refugees prior to and during the resettlement phases.
- HR practitioners need to consider refugees' past knowledge and experience and future aspirations to provide the most suitable and comprehensive solutions.

- HR practitioners are not alone in providing refugee workforce integration support. Instead, they should see themselves as a part of a larger support ecosystem where various stakeholders all co-contribute to achieving shared outcomes.

## **1. Introduction**

The vulnerable situation of refugees – individuals unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin due to a well-founded fear of persecution (UNHCR, 2019) – has deepened dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to UNHCR statistics (UNHCR, 2021), there are at least 84 million people currently displaced, of which nearly 26.4 million are refugees, and millions of others are stateless with no access to basic rights (e.g., education, health care, employment, and freedom of movement). Turkey, Colombia, and Pakistan host the largest number of refugees, with Syrian, Venezuelan, and Afghani people constituting the majority of forcefully displaced migrants (UNHCR, 2021). In June of 2021, US Customs and Border Protection has reported encountering almost 200,000 migrants and asylum seekers at the US southern border since October 2020, more than 6,000 encounters a day, the highest levels in recent history (US Customs and Border Protection).

Fewer opportunities for resettlement and tighter job markets require human resource management (HRM) scholars and practitioners to rethink the role of organisations and the HRM function in the workforce integration of refugees. We define workforce integration as the engagement in economic activities commensurate with individuals' professional goals and previous experience, providing prospects for advancement and economic security (Lee et al., 2020). While considerable research in HRM has explored issues related to the global mobility of professional workers (Caligiuri & Bonache, 2016), the primary focus of the literature is on traditional organisational expatriates (Scullion & Brewster, 2002; Suutari & Brewster, 2000) and, more recently, self-initiated expatriates (Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Inkson et al.,

1997) and skilled migrants (Ramboarison-Lalao et al., 2012; Zikic, 2015). This research is of limited relevance to refugee groups since, compared to expatriates and skilled migrants, refugees face different, and harder to overcome, workforce integration barriers.

To understand these barriers, Lee and colleagues (2020) coined the term *canvas ceiling* to refer to the multidimensional and interconnected obstacles to refugee workforce integration. These barriers include institutional-level factors such as immigration regulations, accreditation requirements, and current socio-political climate concerning migration; organisational-level factors such as rigid practices and structures of employing and supporting organisations as well as employers' biases; and individual-level factors such as demographics, language skills, social networks, psychological responses, and motivation of refugee migrants. These barriers prevent refugees from accessing and advancing to quality employment in receiving societies. Refugees' plight for integration is compounded by the fact that they did not migrate for professional reasons and were not admitted to the country based on an expected match between their skills and the job market's needs.

The metaphor of canvas ceiling is derived from the temporary shelters in which most of the world's refugees are confined for extended periods of time. The often traumatic experiences of refugees pre- and post-resettlement are complex and multi-faceted and unlike those encountered by other types of migrants. Many refugees come to the country after traumatic experiences and may suffer from physiological and psychological challenges hindering adjustment (McBrien, 2005). Refugees often do not have the opportunity to consider their move carefully and prepare before relocation. The distressing experiences preceding resettlement have a spillover effect onto the experiences post-arrival, making the adjustment process of refugees significantly more challenging than that of many other migrating groups, and the acculturation stress significantly higher (Berry et al., 1987). Post-

arrival, refugees often face systemic marginalisation during recruitment, where employers intentionally impose higher standards on refugee applicants than local employees (Lundborg & Skedinger, 2016). This group of migrants typically experiences a loss of occupational status (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006) and lower labour market participation than other migrating groups (Bloch, 2002). As a result, many refugees are unemployed, under-employed, under-paid, or dependent on public assistance (Lee et al., 2020).

In this introduction to the special issue on refugee workforce integration, we contribute to understanding this problem and identifying solutions by proposing a temporal perspective on refugee workforce integration. Our four-stage model recognises that refugee workforce integration is a lengthy process that starts before resettlement and continues past the first job placement. Our aim is to identify fruitful areas for research and practice by outlining the potential role of HRM in refugee workforce integration across various stages of refugees' journeys.

Drawing on the insights from multidisciplinary literature, we begin by introducing a temporal perspective in the context of refugee resettlement. We then proceed by proposing a four-stage model of refugee workforce integration that accounts for the temporal aspects of resettlement. For each stage, we briefly discuss refugees' unique circumstances (for a detailed overview of obstacles to refugee workforce integration, see Lee et al., 2020) and outline the challenges and opportunities for HRM practice and research. Based on this analysis, we reflect on the role of temporality in advancing HRM research and practice in the domain of refugee workforce integration and beyond.

## **2. A Temporal Perspective of Refugee Workforce Integration**

The refugee experience is both a spatial and temporal journey that traverses national borders and time. Any understanding of how HRM should approach refugee integration thus requires

a temporal perspective that should reach beyond the current space and time in which the migrant takes on a refugee identity upon arrival at the resettlement location. However, while the temporal aspect of migration has been explored relatively extensively in research in global mobility in fields of sociology, law, political science, and migration studies (e.g., Cwerner, 2001, Meeus, 2012; Robertson, 2014), it is still somewhat under-theorised (Griffiths, 2014), and certainly overlooked in HRM research on refugees integration. Despite, or perhaps because of the complexity of temporality, scholars in HRM and the social sciences more broadly, have always attempted to fix and compartmentalise the fluidity of place and time in order to make the researched phenomena assessable and measurable (Cresswell, 2006; Schiller, Basch & Blanc-Szanton, 1992).

In the social sciences, ‘methodological nationalism’ – the tendency to view nation-states as ‘natural containers’ for understanding social and political phenomena has been the prevalent approach in theory building and empirical work (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). Yet, describing phenomena within the boundaries of the nation-state has been linked to partial and temporarily constrained perspectives (Wimmer, & Glick Schiller, 2002). As argued by Meeus (2012:1777), within the field of migration studies, methodological nationalism often meant ‘reduction of the social phenomenon of human mobility to the integration of (im)migrants into previously stable nation-states.’ Not surprisingly, research on global mobility within the field of organisation studies – whether focusing on expatriates or migrants – narrowly centres on the temporal phase in which individuals attempt to integrate into a local workforce and local workplace (e.g., Bhaskar-Srinivas et al., 2005; Turchick Hakak, & Al Ariss, 2013); with some recognition that integration begins prior to the moment in which the expatriate or migrant arrives (e.g., Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991), and has implications for reintegration in the home country (e.g., Oddou et al., 2013). Yet, an actor’s path, or social chronology through their working life, is often overlooked or examined

piecemeal rather than holistically (Gunz & Mayrhofer, 2017). This perspective is pragmatically justified, as organisational boundaries can be seen as both spatially and temporarily confined. Yet, with the grand challenge of refugee integration, any hopes of making theoretically and practically meaningful improvements to refugee workforce integration requires serious consideration of the interplay among mobility, temporality, and employment. To this end, our paper proposes that providing sustainable and meaningful solutions to refugee workforce integration requires a holistic and dynamic view of refugees' journey and professional trajectories.

The lived experience of refugees in the process of resettlement and workforce integration may best be characterised by temporal uncertainty, instability, and lack of control or agency. From endless waiting at state borders, in refugee camps or so-called reception centres, to indeterminate periods of time spent in limbo in detention centres while asylum claims or deportations are being processed, the lives of refugees and asylum seekers have been placed within spaces of waiting, continual insecurity, and limbo (Griffiths 2014; Dona 2015; Kohli and Kaukko 2018; Rotter 2016; Turnbull 2016; Spathopoulou and Carastathis 2020). These experiences leave an imprint that has profound influences on the subsequent workforce integration of refugees. Even if asylum is granted, in some cases, the resettlement is temporary, and refugees find themselves having to move on to other locations or even return home, not of their own volition. Living in such a state of uncertainty and instability, refugees develop a unique view about time, their lives, and work (Griffiths, 2014) that is not easily grasped by researchers, the various resettlement agencies, and existing and prospective employers.

In a time-sequenced model of career success of migrants before and after migration, researchers found that the same factors that were influential in occupational success pre-



migration (e.g., human capital accumulated in the country of origin, career self-management behaviours) were less influential on post-migration success (Tharmaseelan, Inkson, & Carr, 2010). Pre-migration experiences with politico-institutional processes and economic structures also influence how migrants will interact with the receiving country's institutions (Froschauer, 2001). Trauma and adversity experienced negatively affect economic and psychosocial integration (Beiser et al., 2015), suggesting that refugees do not arrive with blank slates. Instead, how they approach integration in the host country, including labour market entry, would be dependent on the experiences they have accumulated previously. In fact, the pre- and post-migration cultural and work identities 'do not exist as isolated and autonomous entities' but inform each other and continue to be shaped in an ongoing process of interpretation and re-negotiation as the refugee interacts with the cultural and work environments of the host country (Joseph, 2013: 27). Similarly, long-term integration is dependent upon immediate work opportunities, as these create opportunities to develop the social and cultural capital required for long-term success (Nardon et al., 2020). Refugee resettlement and workforce integration is, therefore, a lengthy and complex journey. Despite the complexity, extant literature tends to isolate and focus primarily on the truncated path to stable and satisfying employment.

Numerous studies describe the nature and challenges of short and long-term refugee workforce integration and related suboptimal employment outcomes (e.g., Carlsson & Rooth, 2016; James et al., 2020; Nardon et al., 2020). Yet, to understand and alleviate refugee employment challenges - to advance theory and enhance practice - we need an expanded perspective that encompasses career progression prior to resettlement and extends towards life-long labour market integration. To address this important objective, we propose a 4-stage conceptualisation of refugee workforce integration that advances a temporal perspective on understanding refugees' journey to meaningful and sustainable workforce integration.

### 3. Stages of refugee workforce integration

We conceptualise refugee integration in four stages. Our conceptualisation is based on extensive consideration of literature in migration studies and related fields that expand migrants' integration beyond the early stages of in-country arrival (e.g., Meeus, 2012; Robinson, 1993; Utržan & Wieling, 2020). The first stage, *pre-arrival*, focuses on the period prior to resettlement, in which individuals are forced to flee their home countries. For many, this could be an extensive period of time confined to the refugee camps that does not culminate with official resettlement. The second stage, which we label *immediate*, is the early settlement stage in which refugees' primary concern is to seek health care and housing and assure that their and their family's basic needs are met. Sometimes this period is lengthy and requires language acquisition before first employment is acquired in the *intermediate*, third stage in our model. Finally, as basic needs are met, and refugees can function in the new society, the *long-term integration* stage begins, in which commensurate employment is sought. It could be that this stage is expanded to include reintegration back in refugees' home countries. These stages are summarised in Figure 1. The presented model outlines a schematic representation of the groups' resettlement experience and parallel workforce integration concerns, recognising that each refugee's journey is unique. We also acknowledge that this journey is not a linear process - refugees can move back and forward or even skip stages as they attempt to rebuild their lives in exceptionally challenging circumstances. Below we present a brief overview of each stage and an emerging agenda for HRM practice and research. Rather than present an exhaustive depiction of all four stages, we aim to initiate a conversation about the importance of temporality in HRM studies on refugee workforce integration that could open up the possibility of greater discourse on the subject.

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### **3.1 Pre-arrival**

Refugee resettlement can be a lengthy and complex process. Prior to arrival in a receiving country, employment is rarely a priority consideration for refugees or the organisations supporting them. Safety and securing the transition to a new location are critical considerations for individuals and their families (Nardon et al., 2020). Basic needs linked to, for example, housing, access to healthcare, and social security might overshadow concerns such as employment. Many refugees might spend years confined in refugee camps and could have vastly varying experiences, even though very few of these are positive (Griffiths, 2014; Kallio et al., 2020). The pre-settlement period could be experienced as a time where things happen very slowly with a lot of waiting; a time of ‘directionless stasis’ where social and personal progress is stalled in forced idleness accompanied by uncertainty and temporal dispossession (Griffiths, 2014; Ramsay, 2020). Research indicates that the lengthy pre-settlement period contributes to skill-atrophy (Hainmueller et al., 2016), which is especially problematic for refugees in professions where up-to-date industry knowledge and accreditations are necessary to maintain one's professional position. At the same time, many refugee camps have established their small employment ecosystems with restricted work activities at refugees' disposal (Alix-Garcia et al., 2018).

Because safety and basic survival needs outweigh occupational concerns, extant literature does not discuss employment-related challenges and opportunities arising at this stage. The pre-settlement stage of refugee workforce integration does not only constitute a ripe area for future research but, most of all, an overlooked and untapped period of time where urgently needed actions could have a substantial potential for impact.

### **3.2 Immediate (pre-employment)**

Arriving in the new countries full of hopes and fears, refugees face numerous obstacles in their quest for the first job. Many will need to acquire new skills and competencies deemed necessary to acquire employment in the receiving country (Suleman & Whiteford, 2013). Others might lack proof of their education or previous employment, and documentary evidence of these credentials might not be readily available (Lee et al., 2020). Even those refugees who are able to evidence their credentials may find it very disappointing to realise that their pre-settlement qualifications and education are not recognised or valued in the new countries (Casimiro et al., 2007; Cheng et al., 2019; Lamba, 2003). This is especially the case in high-skilled professions, guarded by multiple country-specific accreditation processes.

One of the most considerable obstacles to employment for many refugees is the lack of proficiency in the local language. Given the time needed to master a new language, it is not surprising that upon resettlement, many refugees are forced into menial jobs that require minimal language skills. Lack of fluency in the local language, especially that related to the work context, continues to be an obstacle to meaningful employment for years after resettlement (Beiser & Hou, 2000; Szkudlarek, 2019).

Even with recognised credentials and local language fluency, refugees end up un(der)employed as the lack of local work experience becomes a major roadblock for their careers. The liability of foreignness continues to be a challenge for all international job seekers regardless of their migration path (Bloch, 2002; Fang et al., 2013). Combined with limited social networks that often open the doors to employment opportunities (Beaman, 2011; Bloch, 2002, 2008; Fozdar, 2012), these obstacles contribute to refugees' limited employability, affecting their wellbeing and self-efficacy in the job-search process (Bloch, 1999; Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018; Nardon et al., 2020; Silove et al., 2017).

### **3.3 Intermediate (first employment)**

Landing their first job does not necessarily mean that refugees' journey to meaningful employment has been accomplished. Often, the initial job acquired is either below the refugee's initial qualifications or unrelated to their expertise, skills, and aspirations. As a result, refugees often need to reimagine their occupational desires and craft new work-related identities to deal with the challenges inherent in pursuing their ideal career trajectory (Nardon et al., 2020). This is the case for both highly skilled refugees and those whose work experiences are linked with low-skill domains such as farming.

Many refugees, unfamiliar with the local (work) culture, also struggle to adjust and perform at their best in the new work environment (Lee et al., 2020). The initial challenges can further affect their wellbeing and self-confidence, with potential consequences for on-the-job performance and interactions with colleagues. Many can feel alienated and struggle to become a part of the organisation, further exacerbating their psychological trauma. Discrimination and even exploitative practices continue to be reported as core findings in refugee employment studies (Boese, 2015; Champion, 2018; Fozdar, 2012; Hurstfield et al., 2004; Koyama, 2014).

### **3.4 Long-term integration**

Research indicates that refugees' initial workplace placements are short-term and incommensurable with their experience, skills, and aspirations (Carlsson & Rooth, 2016; Steimel, 2017; Xypolytas, 2018; Yu et al., 2007). This is primarily driven by the governmental objectives to get refugees off welfare and, therefore, often leads to employment unrelated to their occupational backgrounds. Consequently, the initial job is only the first step in a lengthy process where refugees rebuild or reinvent their occupational identities (Nardon et al., 2020), understand the local job market, and acquire the skills, know-how, and

qualifications necessary to succeed in the new context. This can be a prolonged and disillusioning process, where some refugees in despair continue to invest in their professional qualifications and send countless job applications with minimal success (Baran et al., 2018; Ives, 2007). The unsuccessful workforce integration process can further contribute to refugees' trauma and negatively affect their wellbeing (Fozdar & Torezani, 2008; Rousseau & Foxen, 2010; Yako & Biswas, 2014). Consequently, after the initial job is terminated, further support is critical for refugees' long-term workforce integration in their receiving countries.

Research indicates that many organisations initially hire refugees on short-term contracts or as interns (Lee et al., 2020; Steimel, 2017). While this gives refugees an initial work exposure and a local experience, it rarely is sufficient to advance their careers and overcome the canvas ceiling. Most refugees would have gained limited relevant networks, connections, or even understanding of their desired industry with such rudimentary work experiences (Beaman, 2011; Fozdar, 2012). As discussed before, most employment that refugees are initially offered is at skill levels below their qualifications, further marginalising this group in the job market.

A long-term professional strategy is also critical if refugees get an opportunity to repatriate to their home countries and rebuild their lives there. We know from the expatriate literature that repatriation can be as challenging as expatriation (Szkudlarek, 2009). This includes numerous work-related challenges experienced by repatriating international assignees. The complexity of refugee workforce integration calls for systemic solutions where these individuals are given an opportunity and support to thrive professionally despite the extreme circumstances that forced their resettlement in the first place.

#### **4. Challenges and opportunities of the four-stage process for HR professionals and research**

In what follows, we propose what a temporal perspective could mean for HRM theory and practice. We suggest a number of practical recommendations, recognising that the field needs an ample amount of research evidencing their effectiveness. This is especially important while translating the usefulness and appropriateness of various measures and interventions across contexts (Szkudlarek, Nardon, Osland, Adler, & Lee, 2021). We, therefore, formulate several research directions that could direct the field in search of evidence-based solutions to the challenges and opportunities of refugee workforce integration.

##### **4.1 Pre-arrival**

There are numerous ways in which HR practitioners could consider engaging in the pre-settlement stage of refugee workforce integration. With the burden for refugee resettlement resting primarily on the receiving countries' governments, new sponsorship initiatives, where employers can sponsor refugees who meet their labour needs, offer a pragmatic solution to refugee (workforce) integration (Vonen et al., 2021). Through these initiatives, employers could identify talent and support refugee work integration through partnerships with humanitarian organisations. HRM's engagement in sponsorship initiatives is critical to align refugees' need for self-sustainability with long-term employment prospects. For example, the Australian government initiated an employment-based path to resettlement (McGhee, 2017). HR professionals can proactively express their interest in being a corporate sponsor or collaborate with organisations such as Talent Without Borders that actively work on matching skilled refugees with employers across the world. This way, HRM could expand its talent pipelines through employment-driven humanitarian visa schemes. With the assistance of NGOs that take care of the selection process and the support required by refugees in their labour market transition, beyond advancing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) goals,

engaging in employment-driven humanitarian visa schemes could be an appealing recruitment strategy in the increasingly competitive war on talent.

Beyond direct resettlement activity, Hirst and colleagues (2021) argue that HR executives can have a pivotal role in lobbying for changes in industrial relations regulations to improve visa arrangements and employment conditions for humanitarian migrants. This is especially critical in the (post-)pandemic economic landscape, where public funding and support for refugees are increasingly scarce (DRC, 2020). At the same time, to provide the best preparation prior to resettlement, HR professionals could help with industry-specific job-market analyses to identify areas with skill shortages to assure that the education and support provided by the government and support organisations are directly linked to the receiving countries' local market needs and tangible employment opportunities (Lee & Szkudlarek, 2021a). Lastly, HR professionals could lobby for changes in professional accreditation processes to establish international standards to prevent some of the most significant obstacles to employment faced by all migrants, including refugees (Szkudlarek et al., 2019).

Most importantly, a great deal of HRM engagement in refugee workforce integration in the pre-settlement stage could be done remotely (Charles, 2021). HRM-driven CSR engagement in refugee camps could be a novel way to advance refugee workforce integration. Many camps have been especially heavily affected by the pandemics as most resettlement activity has been placed on hold. With neighbouring countries being overburdened by increasing numbers of humanitarian migrants, the internal employment ecosystems within refugee camps are likely to be disturbed, with larger groups of refugees finding themselves out of work. For skilled individuals, this means that skill atrophy will become an increasing challenge to employment. For unskilled refugees, the extended time in camps is an opportunity to upskill in preparation for resettlement. Through HRM-CSR



initiatives (Lee & Szkudlarek, 2021a), HR professionals could consider providing virtual education that could be used to up/re-skill refugees. There is a space for active experimentation with virtual mentoring, training, and career coaching. For example, the Global Mentorship Initiative (Global Mentorship Initiative, 2021) bridges leaders worldwide with refugee job seekers to advance their career prospects within the camps.

Last but not least, remote, project-based employment could mean a life-changing opportunity for a refugee and an acquisition of a valuable international workforce for the employer (Charles, 2017). These new hiring avenues could not be more relevant in the omnipresent remote work environment.

All the corporate efforts should be supported with research that advances and guides evidence-based solutions. Critical research areas include an in-depth understanding of existing pre-settlement programs and the role employment education and evaluation (e.g., local job-market analysis) play in them. Another under-researched domain is the study of the various types of pre-settlement training, coaching, and mentoring for refugees and the measure of their effectiveness on employment outcomes. What best practices exist, how could they be scaled up or even transferred across various contexts (country and professional)? Finally, understanding the necessary conditions and factors for the success of remote employment for refugees is one of the most critical research domains. The role and the desired level of engagement of HR professionals in all the above initiatives should be at the core of all investigations.

#### **4.2 Immediate (pre-employment)**

There are numerous ways in which HR professionals could support refugee workforce integration in the early settlement stage. First, they could work directly with support organisations to provide relevant employment training, with opportunities for direct hiring

(Lee & Szkudlarek, 2021a). On-the-job language training is of particular relevance for refugees and should become an integral part of the support (Szkudlarek, 2019). HR professionals could proactively create refugee-specific employment paths through relevant on-the-job training and include this group in the organisational talent pool. Employers could take concrete steps to provide job enrichment experiences and realistic job previews (Hirst et al., 2021). Second, mentoring, coaching, job shadowing, and other workplace-experience opportunities for refugees to understand the local job market's specificities and the local workplaces are among a vast repertoire of engagement opportunities (Olliff, 2010; Hirst et al., 2021). This is especially critical if refugees do not speak the language of their resettlement location, and their initial efforts need to focus on language fluency before commencing paid employment. Initial workplace exposure is also essential in countries where refugees are prevented from paid work in the initial stages of relocation due to visa restrictions (Kaabel, 2017) to prepare them for employment once those restrictions end.

Last but not least, HR professionals are urged to provide networking opportunities for refugee job seekers (Almohamed & Vyas, 2019). Virtual networking can be particularly challenging. Active support of HR professionals in creating relevant social exposure for refugees (e.g., through platforms such as LinkedIn) is a modest form of support that could lead to tangible employment outcomes (Hosain & Liu, 2020).

From a research perspective, Lee and Szkudlarek (2021a) stress how important collaborative efforts are in delivering relevant employment support for refugees. Seeing a diverse set of institutional arrangements and provisions of aid in different country contexts, scholars must continue investigating what forms of training and what types of cross-sector collaborations lead to the best employment outcomes for refugees. An exciting research area for International HRM is what global initiatives make sense across different contexts and

what boundary conditions need to be considered while transitioning best practices across various settings. For example, could remote workplace opportunities for refugees be made available worldwide across multiple subsidiaries of multinational organisations to overcome local language fluency hurdles?

### **4.3 Intermediate (first employment)**

Most research within the realm of HRM focuses on the critical role the HR function can have in the successful workplace integration of refugee job seekers. Forms of support should include access to developmental opportunities (both hard and soft skills training), with attention given to further up-skilling or re-skilling of refugees and tangible advancement prospects (Lee et al., 2020; Syed, 2008).

With the abundance of studies reporting workplace discrimination, creating an inclusive and refugee-sensitive environment should be at the core of the HR agenda. Knowing that workforce integration is a two-way street, organisations are encouraged to train their staff on refugee employees' unique circumstances (Gallagher et al., Forthcoming, 2021; Newman et al., 2018). There is an important role that can be played by support organisations that provide pre and post-employment aid (Nardon et al., 2020). Beyond preparing refugees, these organisations could also work with the local workforce through customised training programs. As Lee and Szkudlarek (2021b) argue, through close collaborative relationships with support providers, HR departments can not only advance the success of refugee placement but make the project viable and sustainable.

As discussed by Hirst et al. (2021), HR professionals must present the benefits and opportunities of refugee employment to the rest of the organisation. For those companies that succeeded, there is also an opportunity to become industry role models and showcase the way to engage in refugee workforce integration to their peers (Szkudlarek, 2019).

There is a robust research agenda emerging at this stage of refugee workforce integration. First, scholars need to support the ongoing quest to battle prejudice and discriminatory practices against refugees. Initial research suggests that employers have numerous misconceptions regarding refugee job seekers and often heavily overestimate the challenges associated with their employment (Szkudlarek, 2019). Demystifying the process of refugee employment and presenting in-depth cases of (un)successful projects that allow drawing transferable lessons for HR professionals new to this initiative is very much needed. Another important avenue for further research should explore what on-the-job opportunities of up/re-skilling could be easily implemented within the workplace. For example, what existing practices and processes for other minority groups could be readjusted to accommodate employees with refugee backgrounds.

Finally, researchers should look into how successful refugee employment impacts the communities they live in and society as a whole. With the focus on community empowerment and social cohesion, refugee integration is an important agenda for many governments across the globe. Scholarly efforts should investigate the role employers can play to provide tangible solutions to this grand challenge.

#### **4.4 Long-term integration**

To support refugees' long-term career trajectory, HR professionals could take an active role in up/re-skilling and guiding refugees in their post-employment journey. Additional mentoring and coaching, referrals, and programs supporting requalification are among many ways to help this group (Olliff, 2010). For example, if hired on an intern basis, an assigned mentor could support refugees transitioning into long-term employment within the employing organisation or support them in finding work outside the organisation. This long-term perspective on career progress is of great relevance in keeping refugees up-to-date with all

relevant professional developments. It is even more critical if refugees have an opportunity to repatriate back to their home countries and rebuild their working lives there.

The support measures should aid those refugees who continue the same line of occupational development and those whose aspirations are evolving or whose initial role was not sufficiently commensurate with their skills, experiences, or education (Nardon et al., 2020). While supporting refugees of various occupational backgrounds and skill levels, mentoring can provide developmental opportunities for both the corporate mentor and the refugee mentee (Gallagher et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2017).

To this end, HRM research could support practice by advancing our knowledge of refugees' long-term career trajectories. What up/re-skilling programs work well, and how can they be adapted to new contexts? How can those programs accommodate refugees' aspirations and overcome their occupational marginalisation? What developmental opportunities could prevent skill atrophy in circumstances where accreditation processes are too lengthy or costly for refugees, but when individuals wish to maintain their professional standing, if an opportunity to repatriate arises? Finally, how can HRM research advance a holistic perspective, where all phases of the refugee journey interplay, creating unique opportunities and challenges for refugee workforce integration?

#### **4. Discussion**

Existing HRM research on refugee workforce integration has tended to theorise and study the refugee experience in a piecemeal and static fashion, focusing on one or parts of the refugee journey, particularly the immediate and intermediate post resettlement phases. It has thus far failed to account for the accumulated experience and transition trajectories that make up the refugee in their entirety and inform how stakeholders might support their (workforce) integration. Based on existing research of refugees' journeys, we have proposed a temporal

perspective to refugee workforce integration. Our model outlines four interconnected phases of the journey and demonstrates the variety and complexity of experiences refugees face in each phase. Refugees' career trajectories and employment endeavours should be considered in their entirety, as past, present and future interplay and create tangible consequences for individuals' aspirations, sensemaking and possible futures. Organisational research has demonstrated that individuals carry rich career histories accumulated over time (Dokko, 2009) that colour subsequent attitudes, behaviours, and dispositions that manifest even in vastly different contexts and times (Martins & Tilscik, 2013). As discussed in this paper, the interplay between past, present, and future is even more complex for refugees, with subjective experiences interplaying with objective and very tangible workforce integration barriers.

To advance research on refugee workforce integration, scholars need a dynamic mode of theorising. Our model calls for avoiding 'fixed position' thinking and fixed assumptions about the refugee experience because these experiences, while often universally challenging, in fact, vary in surprising ways (Griffiths, 2014; Jonsen, 2018). To fix apriori assumptions and stereotypes and paint refugees, refugeeness, and their integration all in the same brush would be problematic for both adequate theorising and workable, practical solutions. Researchers should strive to not only focus on the current space and time of refugee's journey to workforce integration, but their lenses should be as mobile as the population of interest. They should take the perspective of the refugee and 'follow the people' who are not necessarily defined by the time and place where their resettlement occurs but by a more diffused time-space (Meeus, 2012). As temporality appears to be a critical factor in the experienced realities of refugees (Kallio, Meier, & Häkli, 2020: 1), management research cannot ignore the criticality of the temporal perspective in refugee workforce integration research.

An overarching research agenda for all four stages of refugee workforce integration is twofold. First, we need to understand how to elicit greater engagement from HR professionals across all four stages, encouraging a holistic perspective that incorporates the past, present, and future of refugees' experiences in their quest for meaningful employment. While an increasing number of studies discuss the immediate and intermediate settlement, there is an extensive research void in the pre-arrival and long-term integration stages and even fewer studies that embrace a holistic outlook. HRM has a significant role in overcoming “organisational blindness” that fails to recognise the potential and strengths that refugees could bring into an organisation, or affirm the resilience of refugees and their unique perspectives gained from overcoming significant barriers to arrive in the host country. Research is needed from the perspectives of both HRM practitioners and refugees to develop effective interventions that can bridge the perspective of both, leading to mutually satisfying employment relationships.

Second, we need to stress that HR practitioners do not operate in isolation. Instead, their work and efforts are impacted by both external and internal stakeholders, many of whom could exhibit values and interests that are not compatible with the cause this paper advances. Previous research signals the importance of the engagement and commitment of top leadership and organisational teams that work with refugees as critical to the success of refugee workforce integration (Szkudlarek, 2019). Similarly, the centrality of support organisations and the collaborative model of work in the domain of refugee employment indicate what is already well established: grand challenges require the contribution and dedication of multiple stakeholders (Lee, Roy & Szkudlarek, 2021). This collaborative outlook is of particular importance in accounting for the temporal aspect of the refugee journey. At various stages of the journey, different actors might have a more substantial impact on or contribution to the process. The interplay between temporality and stakeholder

engagement forms, therefore, an important research agenda. Researchers need to look into how HR professionals' collaborations within and across sectors could lead to the most effective solutions across the four phases. A multi-actor approach will enhance a perspective that sees employment as an integral part of one's existence.

Hence, theorising about refugees requires breaking out of methodological nationalism. First, management scholars need to operationalise research sites and research questions beyond their nation-state boundaries and organisational interests. Management studies have long been accused of opportunistic research agendas where organisational profit often constitutes the ultimate research objective (Alvesson & Willmott, 2012). With profit and organisational efficiency driving research programs, the broader impact of employment-related outcomes on individuals and societies has often been in the background. Second, to be timely and relevant, HRM research needs to encompass a much broader, multidisciplinary perspective. While the field of HR is in its infancy when it comes to refugee research, other scholarly domains have long been busy mapping the terrain, discussing in length challenges and opportunities at the intersection of refugeeness and employment. This includes work on the temporality of the refugee experience and sensemaking in the context of employment (e.g., Kallio, Meier & Häkli, 2020).

Last but not least, the importance of the temporal aspect is not unique to the refugee experience. All migrating individuals navigate between past, present, and future (re)constructing their occupational roles and aspirations. As they look into the future, they are affected by the past, trying to create meaning and cope with the present. We, therefore, urge HRM scholars in the domain of global mobility to give temporality a serious consideration in advancing our theorisation and solutions to global migration challenges.



## **5. Papers in this special issue**

The papers in the current issue provide support for the temporal perspective we offer. While all papers were aimed at advancing the understanding of refugee workforce integration, two of the three papers in this issue are conceptual papers drawing in different theoretical foundations and systematic literature reviews. The third paper draws on qualitative data (interviews) to reveal a necessarily interdependent and symbiotic relationship between employers and non-profit organisations (NPOs) seeking to facilitate refugees' integration.

In their adoption of a liminality perspective, Loon and Vitali (2021) provide a compelling perspective on refugees' sense of disquiet and betweenness during the transition into a new country. They highlight the need for HRM approaches that are flexible enough to respond to the states of liminality the refugee is experiencing. Liminality refers to 'a state that is temporary and transitional... a process of personal change' (Loon & Vitali, 2021: pg. X). They discuss how refugees experience instability and uncertainty in terms of their process (intrapersonal adaptation), position (job), and place (geography) as they endeavour to integrate into society and the workforce. The paper spans three out of the four stages of our temporal model, suggesting that transitions are ongoing within each stage and refugees may not necessarily move through stages sequentially but may be dealing with different types of liminality at any one time, and that a stage is not necessarily finished even as refugees gain employment. Instead, the sense of liminality may be present over prolonged periods, and organisations should remain vigilant to the needs of their refugee workforce.

Loon and Vitali argue for greater flexibility in organisational approaches towards refugee integration. Specifically, they offer that HR architectures should be more ambidextrous, i.e., HR practices that enable a firm to meet its needs while creating opportunities for refugees to thrive. They recommend training programs that equip both

refugee and non-refugee workforce for successful interactions and integration and redesigning jobs that recognise the greater range of skills and promote multi-skilling across different functions. Bespoke recruitment campaigns and career development pathways may be developed to facilitate refugees' long-term workplace integration.

The paper by Hirst et al. (2021) puts the spotlight on our model's immediate and intermediate stages. It argues for the critical role of HR professionals in refugee workforce integration. It reviews the literature on the pre-employment experiences of refugees and their recruitment and onboarding in organisations and provides criticisms but also promising glimpses of refugee integration practices. For example, in Canada, refugees closed the unemployment gap relative to voluntary migrants within five years of resettlement. Refugees' suboptimal employment outcomes should not, therefore, be seen as given.

Hirst et al.'s paper emphasises the importance of a supportive culture around diversity, including diversity targets and sensitivity to a refugee workforce's unique opportunities and challenges, and innovative ways to recruit, onboard, and introduce refugees into the job market – critical foci in the immediate stage. In what might be considered intermediate stage factors, their paper calls for taking a stakeholder approach that involves cross-sector partnerships with external parties such as NPOs, government agencies, or other institutions (e.g., faith-based institutions), while also calling for examining how internal organisational practices can create a welcoming and inclusive work environment for refugees.

The empirical study of Lee and Szkudlarek (2021) also depicts the immediate stage of the refugee workforce integration experience with NPOs managing new refugees' expectations about the potential types of opportunities available and the expectations of employers about hiring refugee workers. In this regard, the attention to expectations attends to both refugees' past experiences and future aspirations. As the authors propose, a co-

dependent relationship between NPOs and employers exists in that neither can effectively facilitate refugees' integration without the other's active engagement. This collaboration is particularly important for the success of long-term workforce integration of refugees.

Lee and Szkudlarek (2021) identify ways to engage with external stakeholders with a shared interest in integrating a refugee workforce. The study revealed the co-dependence and strategies of NPOs and employers to facilitate refugee workforce preparation and recruitment. Each party would not succeed without the other, mostly because successful refugee integration programs often require a complex set of support practices and complementary expertise that no single party alone holds. NPOs play a critical role in preparing refugees for employment, whereas employers provide opportunities for experience and the job placement itself. Both parties can take a strategic approach to prepare and employ refugee employees to address the labour market's skill shortages short term and create long-term benefits for individuals, organisations and societies.

## **6. Conclusion**

The three papers in this special issue highlight the complexity and protracted nature of refugee workforce integration. Our editorial perspective proposes that this lengthy process should be conceptualised with more care and greater attention to the dimensions of time and place involved in refugee workforce integration. We highlight that diverse sets of HRM practices are necessary at various stages of refugee workforce integration. From a theoretical perspective, we advance the conceptualisation of refugee workforce integration as a temporal process by proposing that it starts before resettlement and continues way beyond the initial job placement. Beyond theory, our paper draws numerous practical implications for consideration for HRM professionals. With specific advice at each stage, we show a wide range of avenues for employers' engagement in refugee workforce integration. Our paper

aims to encourage scholars and practitioners to creatively consider the role that HRM could play in supporting refugees' employment and workplace integration. We hope this special issue will motivate further research and action towards addressing the challenges and opportunities of refugee integration.

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**Figure 1. Stages of refugee resettlement and (workforce) integration**

Pre-arrival	Immediate (pre-employment)	Intermediate (first employment)	Long-term integration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Period prior to resettlement</li> <li>•Many refugees are confined/detained in (interim) camps</li> <li>•Primary focus is on securing safety, health and basic survival needs</li> <li>•Secondary focus is on acquiring legal refugee status</li> </ul> <p><b>•Workforce integration</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Period characterised by limited attention to workforce integration and, depending on its length, contributing to significant skill atrophy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Period immediatly after arrival</li> <li>•Primary focus is on settlement - obtaining housing, health care and access to other essential services</li> <li>•Language and skill training commences</li> </ul> <p><b>•Workforce integration</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•The focus is on the understanding of the local job market, one's employability, and avenues to securing first job.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Period of first attempts to participate in the local workforce</li> <li>•Depending on the institutional context in could start any time between 0-3 years post resettlement.</li> <li>•Focus is on securing financial independence</li> </ul> <p><b>•Workforce integration</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Primary focus is on obtaining local employment regardless of its suitability to one's work experience. First job is often a "survival job"</li> <li>•Employment support often driven by government priorities to assure refugees' quick financial self-sustainability in the receiving countries</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Period after the first employment</li> <li>•The focus is on becoming a fully integrated member of the receiving society and gaining stable long-term employment.</li> <li>•Could include re-integration back in the home country</li> </ul> <p><b>•Workforce integration</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•The focus is on obtaining employment commensurate with refugees' background and aspirations</li> <li>• Commitment to advancing a long-term professional trajectory either in the receiving country or back in the home country</li> </ul>