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

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Abstract: Unprecedented numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have arrived in Europe over the last decade, and young Afghans account for the highest proportion of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children across the UK. Despite research exploring the experiences of child refugees and asylum seekers, less is documented about the experiences of former unaccompanied minors after the age of 18. Using practice-based research, we draw on three new primary data sources to examine factors facilitating and impeding the socioeconomic integration and wellbeing of Afghan former unaccompanied minors. We demonstrate the role of education in creating socioeconomic opportunities, and show how unresolved immigration status detracts from wellbeing.

Keywords: migration, refugees, youth, Afghans, education, qualitative research

JEL classification: I24, I26, I31, J60, Z18

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1 Introduction

Over the last decade, migration flows of unaccompanied minors from the Global South to Europe have increased significantly (Menjívar and Perreira 2017). The number of arrivals doubled from 13,800 in 2013 to 23,300 in 2014, and then quadrupled to 96,000 by 2015 (Connor and Krogstad 2016; Eurostat 2016). The majority (39 per cent) of these young migrants have come from Afghanistan (Eurostat 2016) and in 2016, 740 unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan claimed asylum in the UK (Refugee Council 2017a). These young people are taken into the care of the state, becoming ‘looked-after children’ until they reach the age of 18.

This paper examines the factors that facilitate and impede the socioeconomic integration and wellbeing of young Afghan refugees and asylum seekers who arrived in the UK as unaccompanied children but who are now aged 18 or older. While factors including mental health, social capital, and ability to navigate the UK job market impact the socioeconomic wellbeing of these young people, we identify the core role played by immigration status, which in turn facilitates or constrains access to education and other public services; individual psychosocial wellbeing; and access to formal employment. Although our data demonstrate a strong positive correlation between higher levels of education and improved socioeconomic outcomes, they ultimately suggest that unresolved immigration status can negate the positive contribution of education vis-à-vis socioeconomic wellbeing. We find that immigration status presents as the core challenge across the country, and that, despite small differences in young people’s experiences according to region, the ability of immigration status to curtail educational progress and limit socioeconomic wellbeing is constant.

While much academic attention has been given to the experiences of child refugees and other migrants (e.g. IOM 2014; Lemberg-Pedersen and Chatty 2015; Hammarberg 2010; Kohli and Mitchell 2007; Crawley 2006; Kanics, Senovilla Hernández, and Touzenis 2010, among others), Allsop and Chase (2017) note scant focus on the lived experiences of these young people, of any nationality, after they reach the age of 18—their own work and that of their colleagues Sigona, Chase, and Humphris (2017) providing the notable exception. Similarly, despite Afghans representing the largest group of refugees worldwide in the 1980s and 1990s (Monsutti 2008) and Afghanistan consistently being one of the top ten asylum applicant countries to the UK for the last five years (Refugee Council 2017a), the UK-based population is largely under-researched, with many gaps in knowledge (Vacchelli, Kaye, and Lorinc 2013). The sparse literature on Afghan migrants in the UK that does exist comes from small-scale qualitative studies authored by charities, government, and community organizations (see DCLG 2009 and Gladwell and Elwyn 2012 in particular).¹ To the best of the authors’ knowledge, there are no comprehensive systemic data sources on this group, and there are various challenges in gathering such information. Of particular note, country-level analysis of socioeconomic outcomes for the non-UK-born population from the most recent UK Census data is restricted to the top ten non-UK countries of birth for UK inhabitants, which does not include Afghanistan (ONS 2011a).

This study speaks to these gaps, with new data on the experiences of Afghan care-leavers in the UK who were, before reaching the age of 18, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC). First, we provide an overview of Afghan migration to the UK and existing evidence on integration

¹ Of particular note is the report published by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) in 2009—the first of its kind in attempting to understand the Afghan diaspora in England. Despite being based on relatively small numbers of interviews (205), it remains one of the largest studies available, and the cohesion in responses may indicate wider patterns.

and wellbeing, highlighting the contribution of this study. Second, we discuss the data and methods used in this paper. Third, we analyse the education and socioeconomic data gathered through three distinct sources specifically for this study. In conclusion, we explore several implications of this analysis for future research and policy.

1.1 Afghan migration and integration into the UK: an overview

Past Afghan migration to the UK reflects three distinct waves (DCLG 2009; IOM 2007). The first two of these waves mostly comprised elite or middle-class, politically persecuted Afghans who are highly skilled (Oeppen 2009). A cohort of 3000 sought refuge from the 1973 coup and 1979 Soviet invasion, followed by a second, larger wave after the collapse of the communist regime and civil war in the 1990s (DCLG 2009; Ansari 2004). The 1996 Taliban capture of Kabul also dispersed wealthy, educated Pashtun and Tajik elites (DCLG 2009). Over this period the UK became an increasingly popular destination for Afghans, and accounted for 15 per cent of all Afghan migration to Europe between 1994 and 2004 (UNHCR 2005). Almost 42,000 Afghans applied for asylum in Britain between 1989 and 2007 (Oeppen 2009), with applications peaking in 2001 following the entry of international forces into Afghanistan (IOM 2014). The population of Afghans in the UK was estimated to be approximately 50,000 between July 2010 and June 2011 (Rutter 2013).

Afghan migration to the UK remains significant (Vacchelli, Kaye, and Lorinc 2013), with Afghanistan consistently one of the top ten asylum applicant countries to the UK in the last five years (Refugee Council 2017a), and refugee and migrant flows resulting from the Syrian war argued to be facilitating greater Afghan migration to Europe (Majidi, van der Vorst, and Foulkes 2016). However, in this third wave of migration, the socioeconomic profile of Afghan migrants to the UK has shifted, with the proportion of less-educated and lower-skilled migrants increasing, and the acquisition of refugee status in Europe becoming more challenging than for previous cohorts (Majidi, van der Vorst, and Foulkes 2016). In 2016, 2341 applications for asylum were made by Afghans in the UK, with only 293 decisions granting refugee status (Refugee Council 2017a).

In the past decade, the number of male minors leaving Afghanistan on their own has also notably increased (UNHCR 2010), and a significant feature of present-day Afghan migration to the UK is the prevalence of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.² Afghans have long constituted the largest group of UASC in the UK (ADCS 2016), and yet very few are granted refugee status (Refugee Council 2017a).³ The majority are granted a temporary form of leave, formerly ‘discretionary leave to remain’, more recently UASC leave,⁴ which allows them to remain in the UK until they reach the age of 18. At the age of 17½ they begin a protracted process of applying for extended leave to remain in the UK: many are refused, and risk being forced to return to Afghanistan after spending formative years as looked-after children in the UK care system. Since 2007, 2018 care-leavers have been forcibly removed to Afghanistan (Gladwell et al. 2016), and

² The UK Home Office defines UASC as persons who are under 18 years of age when their asylum application is submitted; who are applying for asylum in their own right; and are separated from both parents and not being cared for by an adult who in law or by custom has responsibility to do so.

³ Although there were 740 applications for asylum made in 2016 by Afghan UASC, only 83 were recognised as refugees in the same year (Refugee Council 2017)

⁴ A child who is under the age of 17½ and who has applied for asylum but been refused refugee status and humanitarian protection will be granted a form of limited leave if there are no adequate reception arrangements in the country to which they would be returned. This kind of leave is called UASC leave. UASC leave is granted for a period of 30 months or until the child turns 17½ years old, whichever is shorter (Coram Children’s Legal Centre 2017).

increasing numbers remain in the UK after being refused asylum and having exhausted all their rights to appeal (IOM 2014).

Importantly, these failed asylum seekers do not have the right to work, and are often not eligible for any kind of financial support. As a result, a highly differentiated lifestyle has emerged for many recent Afghan migrants compared with their more established predecessors, with changes in asylum regulations exacerbating the challenges many face (Blitz, Sales, and Marzano 2005). As such, Afghan care-leavers in the UK present as a particularly vulnerable group among migrants, and raise particular concerns, in terms of integration and wellbeing, that merit investigation.

1.2 The UK policy context: integration, immigration policy, and the refugee crisis

The integration experiences of Afghan refugees and asylum seekers in the UK are naturally informed by the country's broader policy context. The first strategy focusing specifically on recognized refugees and delineating new paths into the UK citizenry emerged in 2000 (Home Office 2000). The strategy aimed to help refugees access employment, benefits, health care, education, and other social goods, and a further integration framework was subsequently commissioned in order to promote better outcomes for refugees (Ager and Strang 2004). Although small numbers of Afghan UASC or former UASC are granted refugee status in the UK (Refugee Council 2017a), gaining this type of leave has typically been viewed as something of a panacea by the young people applying to renew their temporary status at the age of 18 (multiple reports from internal case notes, Refugee Support Network, 2009–17).

However, more recently, new policies have been introduced (Home Office 2005) that limit pathways to integration for those who are granted this status. In 2009, refugees' automatic entitlement to indefinite leave to remain was removed and replaced with five years' leave. The five-year restriction on leave caused reported fears of later expulsion and feelings of social exclusion (Stuart and Mulvey 2013). This shift in policy approach reflects a trajectory that has continued into the present—on 2 March 2017, guidance⁵ was published which introduces the concept of a new safe-return review, which will now be carried out when a refugee's five-year grant of leave has expired (Home Office 2017). Concerns that this issue will have a significant impact on refugees' long-term ability to integrate have led to calls to redefine refugees as 'citizens in waiting' to help change public perceptions (APPG on Refugees 2017).

Alongside these changes to the nature of refugee status, policies towards those still in, or at the end of, the UK asylum system have also changed. In May 2016, the UK Immigration Bill 2016 received Royal Assent and became an Act of Parliament. The British government has stated that the purpose of the Immigration Act 2016 is to tackle illegal immigration by making it harder to live and work without permission in the United Kingdom. It does this through a series of measures including further criminalizing illegal working and introducing additional restrictions around renting property, opening bank accounts, and driving. While the Immigration Act 2016 creates a hostile environment (Bosworth, Parmar, and Vazquez 2018) for those in the UK without permission (including those at the end of the asylum process), the Legal Aid, Prisoners and Sentencing of Offenders (LAPSO) Act 2012 removed most non-asylum immigration law from the scope of legal aid. This means that status regularization has become particularly difficult for young Afghans over the age of 18, who, having spent their formative years in the UK as unaccompanied children, may, despite having been refused asylum, have a right to remain in the UK on the basis

⁵ Page 4 of the Home Office guidance reads: 'When someone with limited refugee leave applies to extend that leave a safe return review will be carried out. Where they no longer need protection they will not qualify for further refugee leave or settlement protection and will need to apply to stay on another basis or leave the UK.'

of Article 8 (Right to Private and Family Life) of the European Convention on Human Rights. In order to demonstrate this potential right to the courts, these young people often now need to pay large sums of money in legal fees.

The above-mentioned policy and legislative climate notwithstanding, the portrayal of the refugee crisis provoked by the Syrian conflict has led to some measure of change in public attitude towards refugees and other migrants. The case of Aylan Kurdi⁶ created a notable shift to a more positive media and public perception of refugees (Katwala and Somerville 2016), with one national newspaper (*The Sun*) that had previously labelled migrants ‘cockroaches’ launching a front-page campaign in Aylan Kurdi’s name in 2015. This shift in public perception has influenced policy towards Syrian refugees, leading to an increase from 1000 to 20,000 Syrians to be resettled in the UK through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme by 2020. Although this generalized sympathetic public mood has not been sustained (IPSOS MORI 2015), a more liberal pro-migration lobby has emerged to rebalance the debate, that ‘once mobilised, showed it, too, could shift government policy’ (Katwala and Somerville 2016, 18).

1.3 Socioeconomic integration and outcomes

There are currently limited data on socioeconomic integration and outcomes of Afghans in particular and refugees more broadly in the United Kingdom, as national data relating to employment and income do not currently disaggregate by all nationalities (ONS 2011a, 2011b, 2011c), and have only recorded reasons for migration since 2010 (Ruiz and Vargas-Silva 2017b). Nevertheless, a strong pattern is already emerging that demonstrates refugees (of all nationalities) struggle to integrate into the labour market to the same extent as other migrants (Campbell 2014; Lindley 2000; Kausar and Drinkwater 2010; Ruiz and Vargas-Silva 2017b). It takes almost two years after the initial granting of protection for the proportion of refugees in employment to reach parity with those of other migrants (Ruiz and Vargas-Silva 2017a); however, the work remains low-skilled and low-paid, and consists of fewer hours (Ruiz and Vargas-Silva 2017b). The Survey of New Refugees (SNR) demonstrated that refugees in fact experience downward social mobility once they access employment in the UK, and persistent under-employment is exaggerated for visible minorities and Muslims (Cheung and Phillimore 2013).

Asylum seekers in the UK generally do not have the right to work.⁷ Research suggests that, even for those who are ultimately granted refugee status and, consequently, the right to work, periods of labour market inactivity negatively affect future employment outcomes—largely due to psychological discouragement and skill deterioration (Chin 2005; Fransen, Ruiz, and Vargas-Silva 2017). Each year spent in the asylum process awaiting a decision has been found to reduce future employment rates by as much as 4–5 per cent (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Lawrence 2016). Compared with their counterparts in other EU countries, refugees in the UK face one of the longest waits to access the labour market (European Parliament 2016), with 22 per cent of new refugees having waited for five years or more before receiving a decision on their application for asylum (Cebulla, Daniel, and Zurawan 2010). Mental health difficulties are often exacerbated by the time spent awaiting a decision (Kearns et al 2017; Pittaway and Bartolemei 2001), and this in turn limits the number of hours that can be worked and the type of employment that can be undertaken (Kone and Vargas-Silva 2017). English language competency has also become a barrier to working in public sector roles in the formal labour market, with the Immigration Act 2016

⁶ Aylan Kurdi was the three-year-old Syrian child who was found drowned on a beach in September 2015, having died at sea fleeing his country.

⁷ The right to work may be applied for after 12 months of waiting for an initial decision on an asylum claim—but, if it is granted, the right to work applies only to a list of restricted ‘shortage’ occupations that are typically highly skilled.

placing a duty on public authorities to ensure that each person who works for them in a customer-facing role is fluent in English (ILPA 2016).⁸ Gaining fluency in English has been made more difficult by nationwide reductions in the funding of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages; Stuart and Mulvey 2013), and recognition of prior learning remains a challenge for those who achieved qualifications in their country of origin (Harris and Breier 2011).

For those refugees who have achieved higher levels of socioeconomic wellbeing, fluency in English language has indeed proved critical (Cheung and Phillimore 2017; Rutter et al. 2007), as has the guidance, mentoring, and advocacy provided by co-national or religious groups (Cheung and Phillimore 2013; European Parliament 2016; UNHCR 2013).

With regard to the Afghan migrant community in particular, some of the more rigorous quantitative data available relate to unemployment: it is particularly high, with 24 per cent unemployment across Afghans of economically active age in London, compared with 6 per cent across London's economically active total (Oeppen 2009). This pattern is consistent with Afghans in the UK more widely, where 39 per cent employment among Afghans aged 16–64 with varying levels of education (Rutter 2013) is significantly lower than the national average for the same year (71 per cent) and lower than the employment rate of those with no qualifications at all in the wider UK population (43.5 per cent) (ONS 2011b).

High levels of 'unemployment' in the data do, however, obscure Afghan participation in the 'informal' labour market. Many report seeking informal work even after being granted the right to work as a result of a lack of knowledge about accessing the formal sector, and a fear of leaving welfare benefits entirely (DCLG 2009). Nonetheless, navigating the informal labour market is not without substantial risk. As a result of the Immigration Act 2016, a new offence of illegal working came into force on 12 July 2016, criminalizing individuals who work while living in the UK unlawfully, or in breach of the conditions of their stay. New provisions also affect employers contracting those without permission to work, widening the offence of employing an illegal worker and increasing the penalties for doing so (ILPA 2016).

Studies suggest that where Afghans are able to find work, whether formal or informal, they undertake predominantly low-skill, low-paid casual work in the service industry—such as in restaurants, shops, takeaways, car-washes, hotels, or driving taxis (Khan 2013; DCLG 2009). In London, estimates over the last ten years suggest that the majority of stalls in the capital's vast network of street markets are manned or owned by Afghans (Nicolini 2013). Discrimination in the formal and informal labour markets is also often reported (Rutter et al. 2007; Jones 2010).

While a lack of qualifications and fluency in English may in part explain why many obtain this genre of work (DCLG 2009), others, with more advanced qualifications from Afghan universities, are also found in similar jobs, having struggled to access work appropriate for their skill level. Little recognition of foreign academic qualifications in the UK has meant that some report a loss in social, economic, and professional status since arriving in the UK, occupying lower-skilled roles than those they held in Afghanistan (DCLG 2009).

The experienced loss in social and professional status is thought to compound high levels of undiagnosed depression within the community (Bloch 2002; Spence 2005; SPN/LDC 2006). A

⁸ This part of the Act came into force on 21 November 2016. 'Fluent' English is defined as 'sufficient spoken English to enable the effective performance of their role' (ILPA 2016).

welfare and advice needs assessment of Afghan communities in Harrow (London) supports the idea of wider erosion of health and positive social capital, and lists issues such as poor education, trauma and mental health, use of drugs and alcohol, and involvement in gangs as significant issues affecting Afghans in London (Vacchelli, Kaye, and Lorinc 2013).

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

2 Methodology

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

Freedom of Information (FOI) requests were submitted to all 152 local authorities in England in October 2017. Of these local authorities, 108 responded with data to at least one of the questions, 4 refused to respond due to the cost of gathering the data,⁹ 14 refused to respond under data protection legislation,¹⁰ 5 responded to say that they did not hold the data requested, and 21 did not respond and gave no reason for not doing so. The full FOI request submitted is available in Annex 1: data were requested on the number of Afghan UASC (under 18) and care-leavers (18–24), and on the various levels of qualification obtained by Afghan care-leavers. At a national level, there are no centrally collected data for care-leavers who were formerly UASC. The responses suggest data for former UASC care-leavers are not systematically collected at the local authority level either, and local authorities record different types of data in different ways. Educational data disaggregated by nationality was in particular often reported not to be held by local authorities. The analysis in this paper is based on data provided by the 23 local authorities who reported having 10 or more Afghan care-leavers (see Annex 2).

In addition, the article reflects the reported experiences of 31 Afghan care-leavers in England. Focus group discussions were carried out with 25 young people across three regions—London, the South East, and the East Midlands—and in-depth interviews with an additional six young people across the same regions (see Annex 2). The three regions were selected on the basis of (a) numbers of Afghan care-leavers in the region and (b) the ability of Refugee Support Network (RSN) staff to conduct focus groups or interviews with young people there, through RSN's own programmes or networks of partners. Thirty-two per cent of respondents were London-based, 42 per cent in the East Midlands, and 26 per cent in the South East. The majority of respondents were aged between 21 and 24 (42 per cent), and only one respondent was female. The vast majority of UASC and former UASC in the UK are male (ACDS 2016) and the Afghan population of former UASC is particularly male-dominated. The majority of respondents had been in the UK either for between two and five years (42 per cent) or for between six and ten years (36 per cent). The participants were selected from RSN and partner organization databases: potential

⁹ Local authorities are entitled to refuse to provide the data requested in an FOI request if the cost of doing so would exceed £450.

¹⁰ Under the Data Protection Act, local authorities are entitled to refuse to provide the data requested if the numbers involved are so low that the individuals the data refer to may be identifiable.

respondents meeting nationality, age, and care-leaver status requirements were contacted and focus groups were conducted with those who expressed an interest in participating in the research. All respondents were able to communicate adequately in spoken English, and interpretation was not necessary.

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

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

Carried out by researchers from the London-based NGO Refugee Support Network, this paper is an example of practice-based analysis and research on refugee issues. RSN provides education-related support to around 450 refugee and asylum-seeking young people in England each year. In 2016–17, RSN worked with circa 100 young Afghans in England. Strengths of adopting a practice-based approach in this particular instance include the significant benefits of RSN’s networks in the setting up of interviews; the ability to conduct the entire project through researchers with extensive experience of engaging with young refugees and asylum seekers; and access to institutional learning from the RSN Senior Management Team (SMT) compiled through almost a decade of observing the longer-term impacts (both positive and negative) on young refugees of participating in research. Challenges of a practice-based approach in this instance included a potential bias towards education within the networks of professionals and young people available to RSN, and the potential impact of a service-provider–recipient power imbalance influencing young people’s responses. In order to best mitigate for these risks, the research has been carried out in line with RSN’s Research Ethics Framework (RSN 2015, developed in response to the above-mentioned SMT observations), Child Protection Policy, and policies for safeguarding vulnerable adults.¹¹

¹¹ As per the guidance in RSN’s Research Ethics Framework, a ‘do no harm’ approach is adopted in all interactions with young people. This includes feelings of discomfort which may be caused if questions lead former UASC to reflect on distressing experiences or circumstances. All possible measures were taken to minimize such discomfort, including making it clear that young people were able to stop the interview or leave the group at any time, and were not obliged to answer any question they did not wish to. It was also made clear to respondents that their own situation, in particular their immigration status, employment situation, or ability to access further education, would not change as a result of participating in the study. Verbal consent (more appropriate due to low literacy levels) was obtained from participants in advance of the interview or focus group discussion, and reconfirmed when the focus group or interview took place. Where participants were receiving mentoring or advice support from RSN or a partner organization, it was made clear that this research was completely separate to the support they were receiving, and their decision to participate or not would in no way and at no time affect the support they received from RSN or a partner organization. It was emphasized to young people that they could withdraw from participation at any point, including after the focus groups or interviews had been completed. The provision of snacks and selection of locations familiar to the respondents helped to create a youth-friendly environment, and young people were given gift vouchers as a gesture of appreciation for giving up their time.

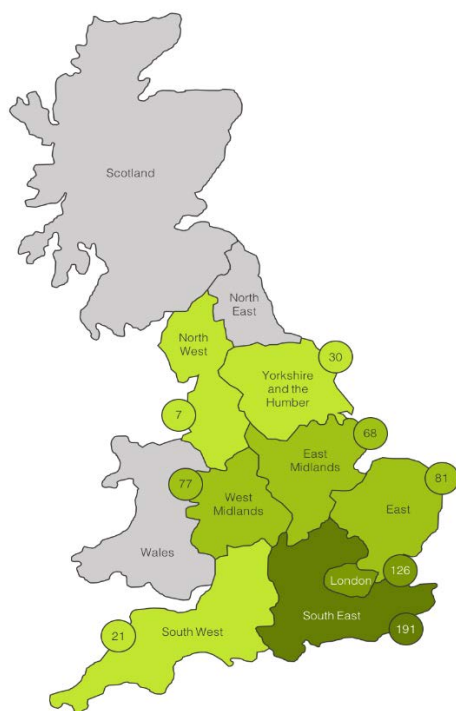
3 Education and the socioeconomic wellbeing of Afghan care-leavers in the UK: findings

On arrival in the UK, UASC are taken into the care of a local authority. If a young person has been in the care of a local authority for 13 weeks before they reach the age of 18, the local authority’s duties to that young person continue as they leave care and transition to independence (The Children Act 1989). These duties continue until the young person reaches the age of 21, or 24 if they remain in full-time education, and include the provision of accommodation, advice, and financial support. Where a former UASC has been refused asylum and has exhausted all their rights to appeal, the local authority retains the power to provide support if not doing so would cause a breach of the young person’s human rights. Nonetheless, despite these provisions, the reduced support or, in some cases, termination of support after a young person reaches 18 make this transition a challenging time for former UASC, and young Afghans appear to be disproportionately affected (Gladwell and Elwyn 2012).

3.1 Location and immigration status of Afghan care-leavers across England

Afghan care-leavers in England are concentrated into four regions—London,¹² the South East, the East Midlands, and the West Midlands (Figure 1), with the three locations of Kent, London, and Nottingham having the highest numbers (see Annex 2).

Figure 1: Numbers of Afghan UASC and Afghan care-leavers, by region of England (FOI data)



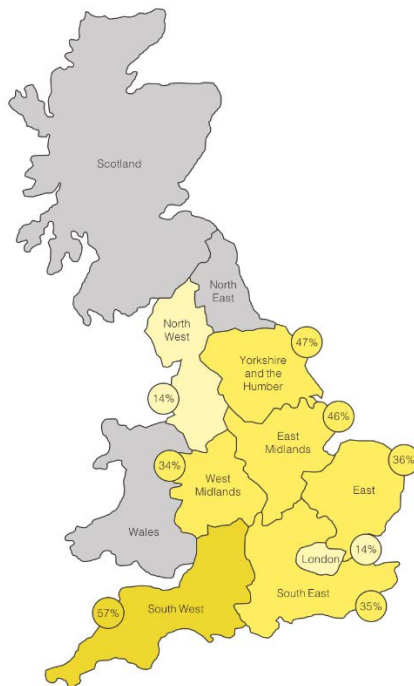
Note: Data from England local authorities with five or more Afghan UASC (LAs with fewer than five UASC do not have to respond to FOI requests under data protection legislation).

Source: Authors’ illustration based on data obtained through FOI requests to LAs.

¹² London is divided into multiple borough councils, each of which is its own local authority and collects data accordingly. For this reason, London, although one city, is classed as a region of the UK.

In every region of the UK except for the South West (which is the region with the third-lowest number of Afghan care-leavers in the country), the majority of Afghan care-leavers are living with unstable immigration status. As claims for asylum are processed on a national rather than a regional basis, this lack of significant regional variation is perhaps to be expected. Stable immigration status has been defined as having refugee status or indefinite leave to remain (Figure 2). The majority of those with unstable status are former UASC who were previously in receipt of discretionary leave to remain or UASC leave, but who were not granted an extension to this leave at the point of turning 18.

Figure 2: Percentage of Afghan care-leavers aged 18–24 with stable forms of status (refugee status or indefinite leave to remain), by region of England (FOI data)



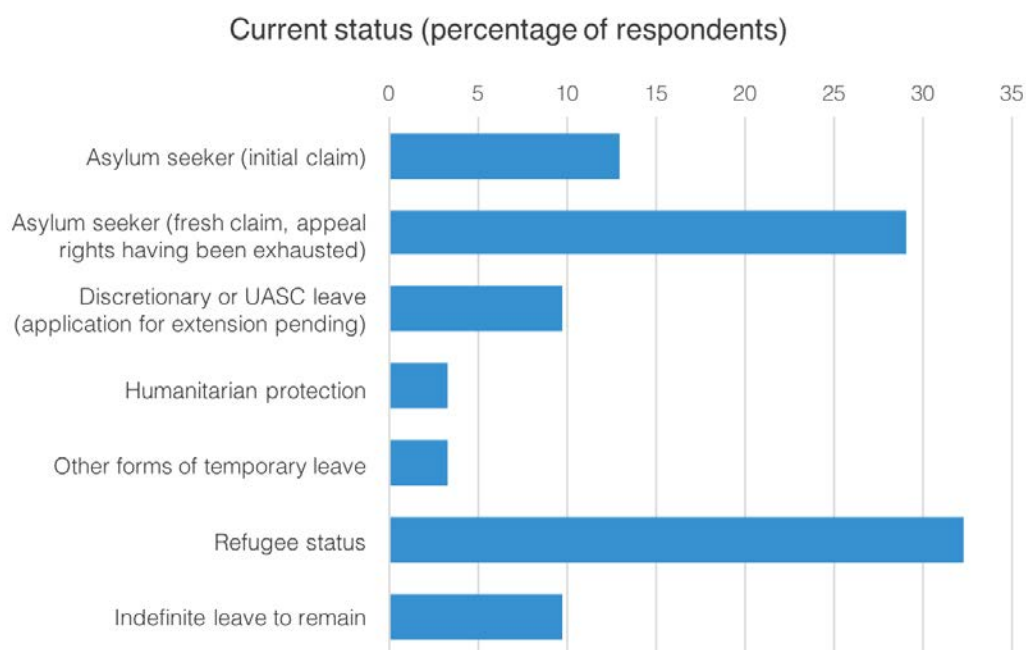
Note: Data from England local authorities with five or more Afghan UASC (LAs with fewer than five UASC do not have to respond to FOI requests under data protection legislation).

Source: Authors' illustration based on data obtained through FOI requests to LAs.

Participant profile data reflect national data, with 59 per cent of Afghan care-leavers interviewed living with an unstable form of status (see Annex 2 and Figure 3).¹³ Some 42 per cent are asylum seekers, with the vast majority of these (29 per cent of total) at the end, rather than the beginning, of the asylum process. These young people typically have held discretionary leave to remain, have been refused an extension to their leave at 18 years old, have exhausted the process of appealing this decision, and have now submitted a fresh claim for asylum on the basis of evidence not included in their original claim. This article will demonstrate the dominant impact of unstable (or indeed no) immigration status on the potential of these young people to achieve socioeconomic wellbeing in the UK, and it is critical to note that a significant majority are living with said status.

¹³ Note that refugee status has been classed as a 'stable' status despite the recently introduced possibility of return after five years.

Figure 3: Immigration status (all focus group and interview participants)



Note: See Annex 2 for more detail on reported immigration status by education level.

Source: Authors' illustration based on focus group and interview data.

3.2 Education profile of Afghan care-leavers

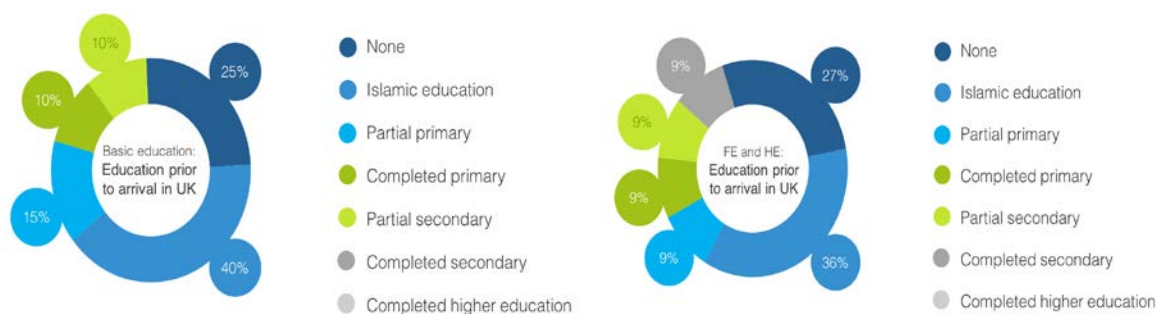
3.2.1 Education prior to arrival in the UK

National data on the level of education obtained prior to arrival in the UK are not collected for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. However, a significant majority (64 per cent) of the Afghan care-leavers interviewed for this paper had received no education, or Islamic education¹⁴ only, before arriving in the UK (see Figure 4). For those who had participated in mainstream education, it was predominantly at the primary level. Some 13 per cent had attended but not completed primary school, with an additional 6 per cent having completed primary school. Nine per cent of young people had attended but not completed secondary school before leaving Afghanistan, and an additional 3 per cent had completed this level of schooling. Many young people spoke of arriving in the UK not able to write their name in English, and being functionally illiterate in their mother tongue. The responses of the professionals interviewed suggest similar patterns: all reported that the majority of young people they had worked with had either no, Islamic only, or partial primary education before leaving Afghanistan. In cases where young people had started or completed secondary school, this level of education was often as a result of either having politically engaged parents, or attending a secondary school in a Pakistani refugee camp. After leaving Afghanistan, long and difficult journeys, including periods in detention and makeshift refugee camps in transit countries, further contributed to the fragmented educational histories of

¹⁴ For the purposes of this paper, Islamic education is defined as learning to read the Qur'an in Arabic.

the young people interviewed. Interestingly, no significant regional variation in educational profiles prior to arrival in the UK was found.

Figure 4: Education prior to arrival in the UK, by UK level of education achieved (focus group and interview participants)



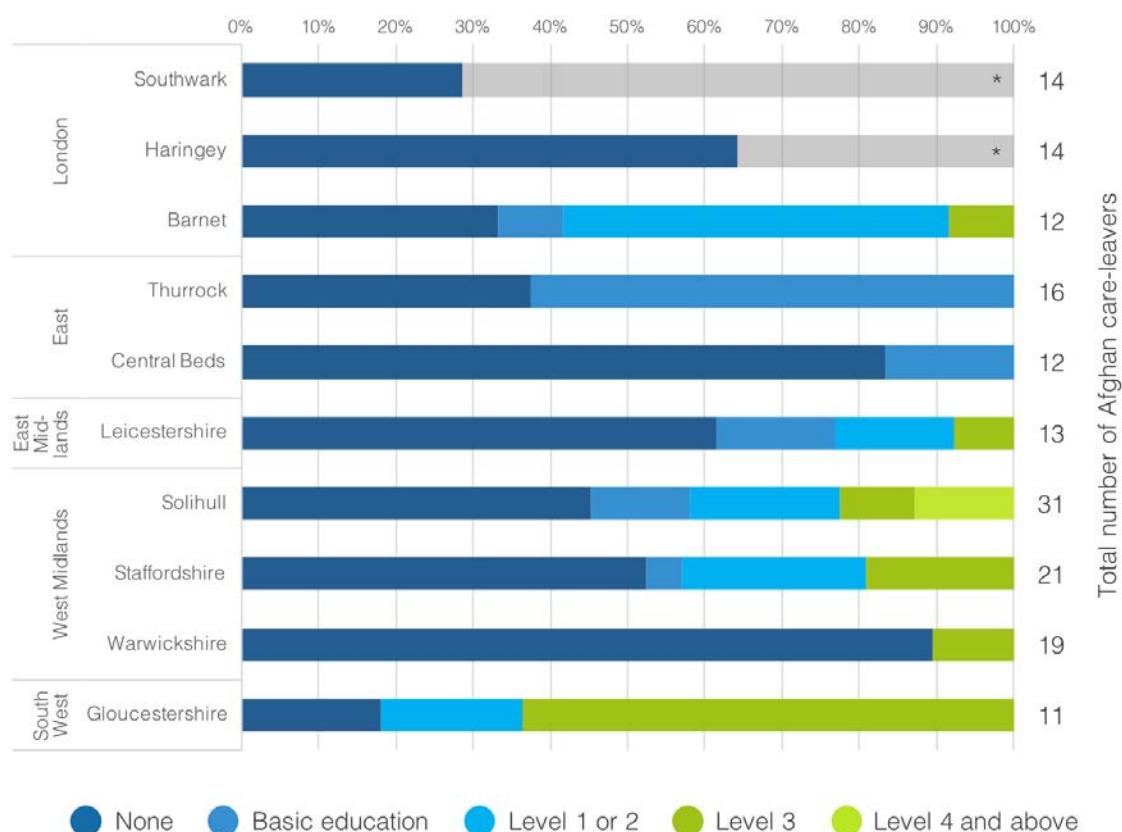
Source: Author's own illustration based on focus group and interview data.

3.2.2 Education in the UK

Prior to this study, data on educational achievement for Afghan care-leavers have not been gathered in the UK. However, the picture emerging for this group is one of cumulative disadvantage. Research demonstrates that the broader cohort of which this group is a part (looked-after children of all nationalities including British) are educationally disadvantaged when compared with their non-looked-after peers. Only 13 per cent of looked-after children achieved five A*–C GCSEs at 16, compared with the 58 per cent national average (DfE 2011). They are also less likely to go on to higher education at 18 or 19 than their non-looked-after peers (only 6 per cent, compared with 36 per cent) (DfE 2011).

Though the majority of local authorities either do not collect data at this level or refused to provide it due to cost or data protection regulations, the data returned suggest that Afghan care-leavers face significant struggles with educational progression (see Figure 9). In all 11 local authorities that provided data, significant numbers of Afghan care-leavers are without any UK educational qualification at all, with the proportion with no qualifications over 80 per cent in two areas and under 20 per cent in only one. In the UK more broadly, only 8 per cent of people in their twenties are without qualification (ONS 2011b), a figure not achieved among Afghan care-leavers in any English local authorities. Where qualifications have been gained by Afghan care-leavers, the majority remain at the basic level, with entry-level (pre-GCSE) qualifications only, and very few have progressed beyond Level 1–2 (equivalent to GCSE). In contrast, 86.7 per cent of all 19-year-olds across England were qualified to Level 2 or higher in 2016, and 61 per cent were qualified to Level 3 (DfE 2017b). The proportion of Afghan care-leavers completing higher education (Level 4 and above) is predictably low, as a result of the age of the cohort in question (Figure 5). However, data collated on entrance to higher education in the last three years show that the proportion of Afghan care-leavers entering university, while below the national access rate of 32.5 per cent of all 18-year-olds (UCAS 2017), is significantly above the 6 per cent national average for care-leavers in general (Figure 6). The data suggest that while the majority of Afghan care-leavers do not progress beyond Level 1 or 2 (GCSE equivalent), there is a small but significant minority who excel academically, achieving high levels of education despite substantial disadvantage both prior to and on arrival in the UK.

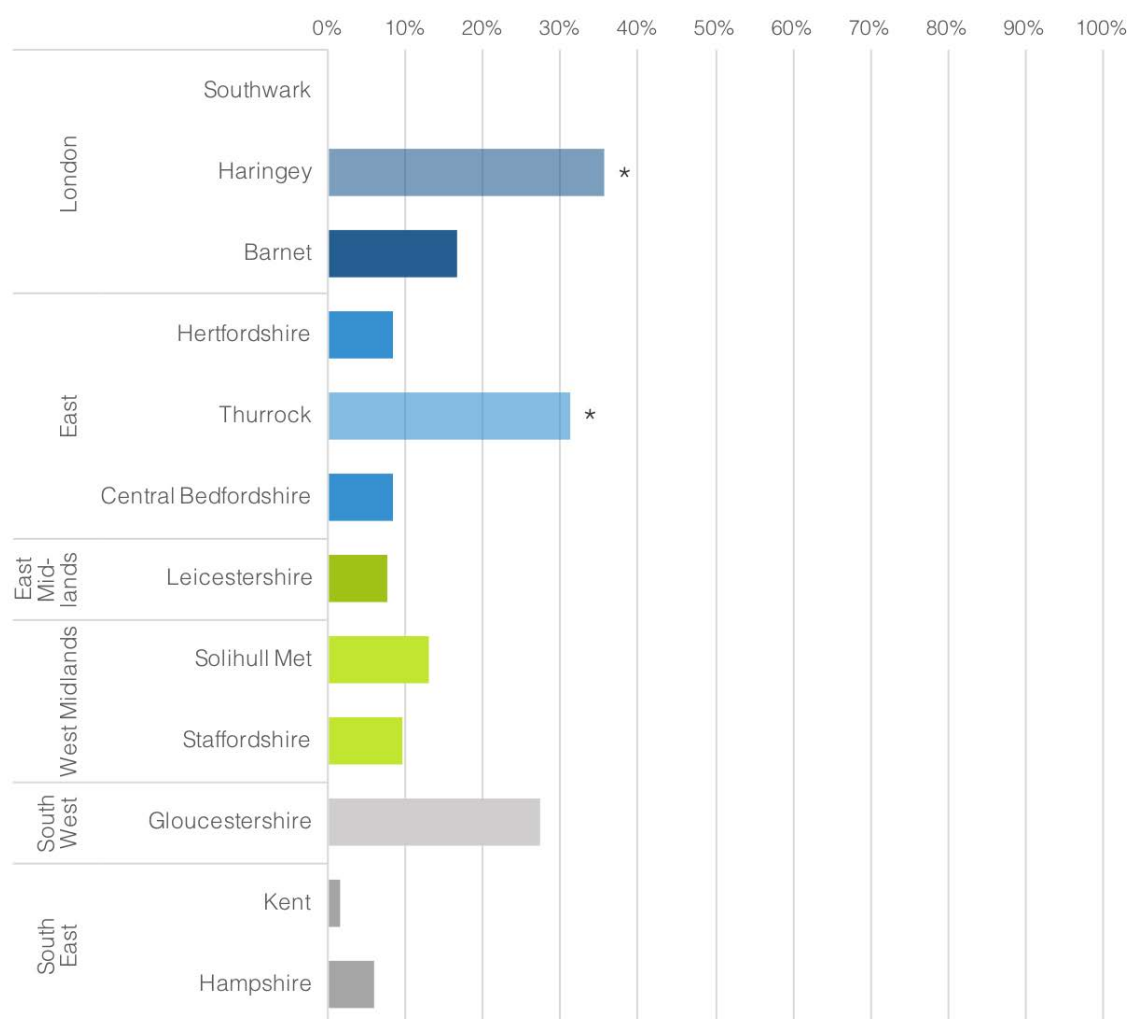
Figure 5: Percentage of Afghan care-leavers aged 18–24 who have completed UK education, by level (FOI data)



Notes: * Percentage of Afghan care-leavers with basic education, within range shown; exact number not provided (LAs with fewer than five UASC do not have to respond to FOI requests under data protection legislation). There is some variation in LAs included in Figures 5 and 6 as a result of some LAs responding to some questions in the FOI request but not others. For example, a LA may have provided data on levels of education obtained but not specifically on entrance to university. Data is shown where provided.

Source: Authors' illustration based on based on data obtained through FOI requests to LAs.

Figure 6: Percentage of Afghan care-leavers entering university in the last three years (FOI data)

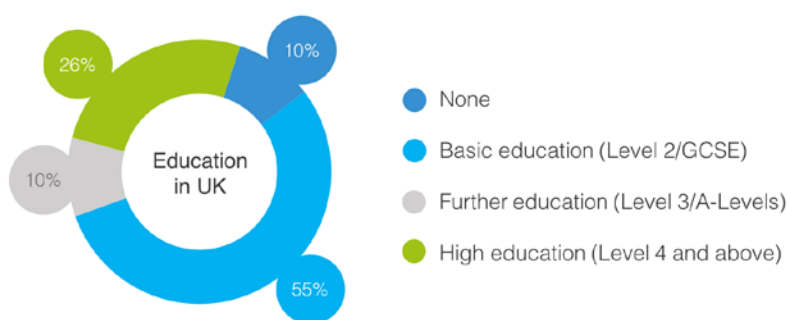


Notes: * Actual percentage of afghan care-leavers with any level of UK education is within range shown; exact number not provided (LAs with fewer than five UASC do not have to respond to FOI requests under data protection legislation).

Source: Authors' illustration based on based on data obtained through FOI requests to LAs.

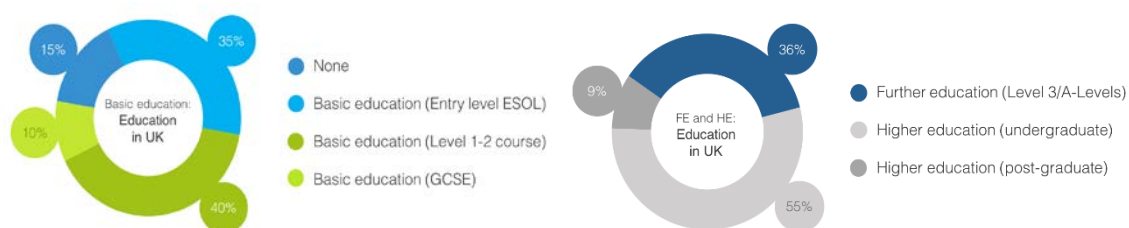
Comparable patterns emerge in the focus group and interview participant profiles, though the trend in general is towards slightly higher levels of educational participation and achievement (Figure 7). This is likely a result of the young participants being identified by a variety of organizations involved in education or other forms of support for refugee and asylum-seeking youth. Notably, only 10 per cent of participants had no UK educational qualifications at all—perhaps because a proportion of respondents are currently engaging with or have previously engaged with an organization with an explicit aim of helping young refugees and asylum seekers overcome the barriers to educational progression (Refugee Support Network 2012). Nonetheless, the profiles reflect the national picture in that the vast majority have achieved only basic-level education (up to GCSE or equivalent), a significant minority have achieved higher-education qualifications, and very few have mid-level qualifications (Level 3 or A-level equivalent) (see Figure 8).

Figure 7: UK education levels (focus group and interview participants)



Source: Authors' illustration based on focus group and interview data.

Figure 8: Type of UK education achieved, by level (focus group and interview participants)



Source: Authors' illustration based on focus group and interview data.

3.2.3 Barriers to educational progression

Over three-quarters of the Afghan care-leavers interviewed expressed an active desire to study at a higher level, and believed that this would help them find work they considered meaningful. When reservations about or disillusionment with the idea of studying further were expressed, it was by those with basic-level qualifications only. Their rationale for stopping studying was connected to their age, their emotional wellbeing, or their inability to focus as a result of anxieties around their immigration status. Young people from London and the South East were most likely to want to progress in their education, and those in London had particularly high aspirations, with two-thirds expressing a desire to one day attend university, even if currently studying at entry level. Several expert key informants suggested that this regional variation may be attributed in part to the greater concentration of universities in London and the South East. The 'role model' affect also appears important, with the presence of a number of young Afghan refugees who have attended university and secured higher levels of employment in London well known and visible within London Afghan youth culture in particular. All respondents who already held further or higher qualifications wanted to progress to the next level of study, whether that involved undergraduate, postgraduate, or doctoral studies, clearly articulating the ways in which they felt further study would benefit them. Although education was highly valued at all levels, the perceived value of education appears to increase as more education is gained, with one young person who is studying for an undergraduate degree explaining that 'I want to do more because I see now that the more you learn, the more you know, and the more opportunities you have' (YPLondon2B).

Despite this enthusiasm for further study, the majority of respondents at all levels and in all regions felt that this was unlikely to be possible for them. Several key barriers to educational progression were identified (Figure 9). The three most frequently identified barriers (immigration status, mental health, and finance) were consistent across all levels of achieved education, and in responses from professionals.

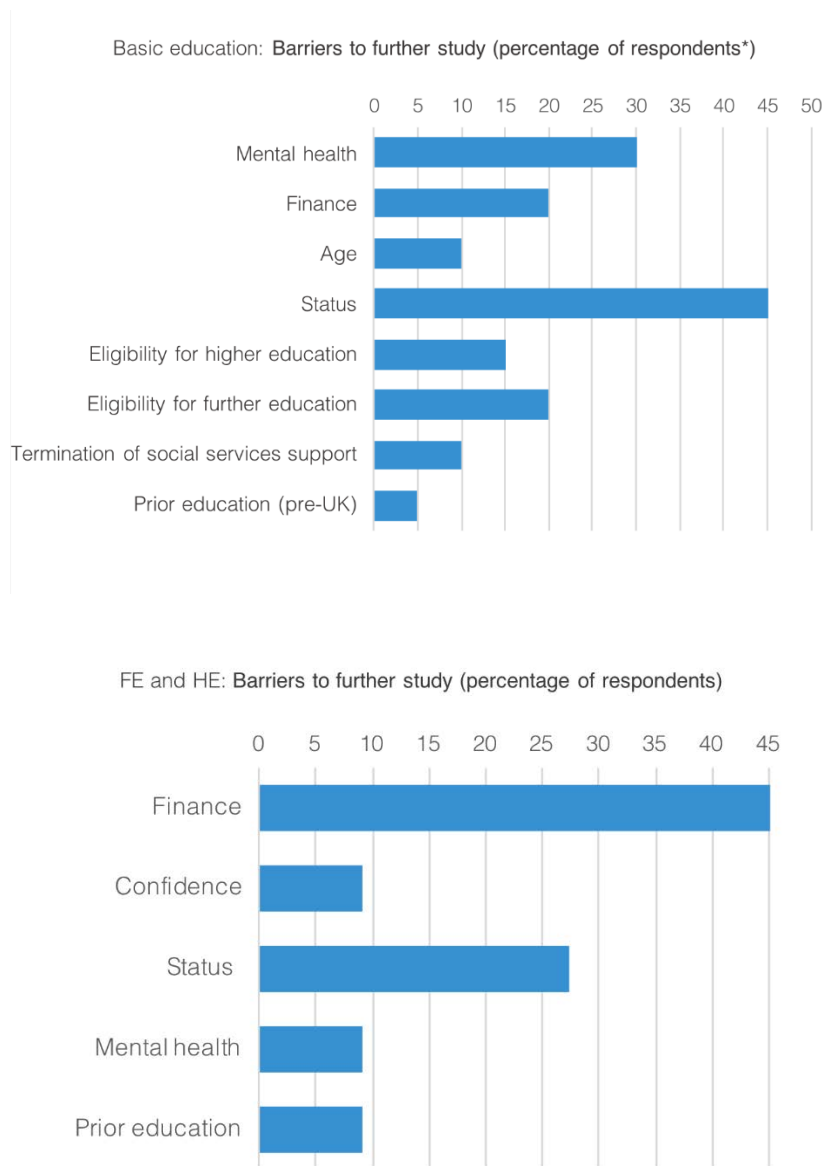
Among those with basic education, immigration status was the most frequently reported barrier to educational progression, with multiple young people explaining that ‘I don’t have the right papers’ (YPSouthEastB) and ‘if I had papers I would study more’ (YPLondon1A). After status, mental health was the next most frequently identified barrier, with young people explaining that their lives were ‘too stressful’ (YPEastMidlandsA), with ‘big pressure in my head’ (YPLondon1C). Third, financial difficulties were reported as preventing young people from continuing in education, primarily because of needing to work, whether formally or informally, to support themselves or family members in Afghanistan. A fourth significant barrier at the lower level of education is eligibility for funded places at both the further and higher education levels. Fee remission at the further education level becomes more complex once young people are aged 19 and over, and those aged 19–24 may only be eligible for full fee remission if they are studying Level 3 qualifications for the first time (Coram Children’s Legal Centre 2017). According to both FOI and participant profile data (Figures 5 and 7), the majority of Afghan care-leavers are studying at entry level, or Level 1–2. Many report experiencing challenges enrolling for fully funded places, particularly when they are still asylum seekers awaiting an initial decision or having submitted a fresh claim (YPLondon2D; YPSouthEastA; YPSouthEastB; YPSouthEastF; YPEastMidlandsC).

For those wishing to study at the higher education level, eligibility for home student fees and student loans is restricted. This was repeatedly identified as a significant barrier to further study (YPLondon1A; YPLondon1C; YPLondon1E; YPSouthEastC). Asylum seekers and those with discretionary leave are not eligible for either (Refugee Council 2017b), and although a number of scholarship programmes specifically for asylum-seeking students have emerged in recent years, competition is high and the number of beneficiaries limited (Refugee Support Network 2012). The majority of respondents who identified this issue as a barrier to progression were not yet studying at a level that would enable them to apply to university—yet notably this barrier was reported as important, and affected motivation even at the lower levels of study. Some small regional variation was found with this barrier (finance), with respondents in London and the South East taking a slightly more optimistic view of their chances of progression. These young people presented as more aware of scholarships and fee waivers than those in other regions, and were more likely to have a friend who had achieved higher levels of education.

The reported barriers to educational progression also intersect, and, in most cases can ultimately be traced back to uncertain immigration status. Young people in all three regions repeatedly explained that the mental health issues and financial difficulties preventing them from focusing on education had arisen as a direct result of their uncertain immigration status. Eligibility challenges and the termination of support from the local authority are also often the result of immigration status, and the professionals interviewed repeatedly emphasized the inter-linked and mutually reinforcing nature of the barriers young Afghans face when trying to progress beyond basic levels of education.

Although a higher proportion of those studying at further and higher levels of education have refugee status or indefinite leave to remain, immigration status remains a progression challenge for those studying at higher levels while still seeking asylum (with the assistance of scholarships and fee waivers) or with other time-limited forms of status. Mental health conditions, while cited as a barrier to progression by a significant minority, were not as dominant as at the lower educational levels, and were seen as less of a challenge than financial barriers. This is perhaps explained by the higher incidence of more stable forms of immigration status at this level, and the financial challenges faced by the majority of would-be postgraduate students of all nationalities and immigration status.

Figure 9: Barriers to educational progression, by level of UK education achieved (focus group and interview participants)



Note: * Some respondents cited more than one barrier.

Source: Authors' illustration based on focus group and interview data.

Where Afghan care-leavers had been able to progress in their education, the role of significant adults proved critical, across various enabling factors identified by respondents. The most frequently cited enabling factor, whether at the basic, further, or higher level and across all regions, was school- or college-based support, such as a particularly committed teacher who provided extra help or the provision of extra English as an Additional Language (EAL) classes or 1:1 support. The second most frequently identified enabling factor, again consistent across regions and educational levels, was the support provided to the young person by the local authority looking after them. As with the school-based support, this often took the form of the presence of a particularly dedicated individual (social worker, key worker, or leaving care personal advisor), who gave the young person time and advice and, perhaps most critically, advocated for them at key moments in their progression journey. Third, support from significant adults working or volunteering for NGOs had also proved beneficial, in particular through the provision of

educational mentoring, advice and guidance, and advocacy. The additional enabling factor of the historical presence and support of a foster carer, although not mentioned at all by young people, was repeatedly identified by professionals as a key indicator of likely educational progression among the Afghan care-leavers they worked with. This, it was noted, creates an advantage for those young people arriving in the UK aged 15 or younger, as those arriving aged 16 or over are not placed in foster families.

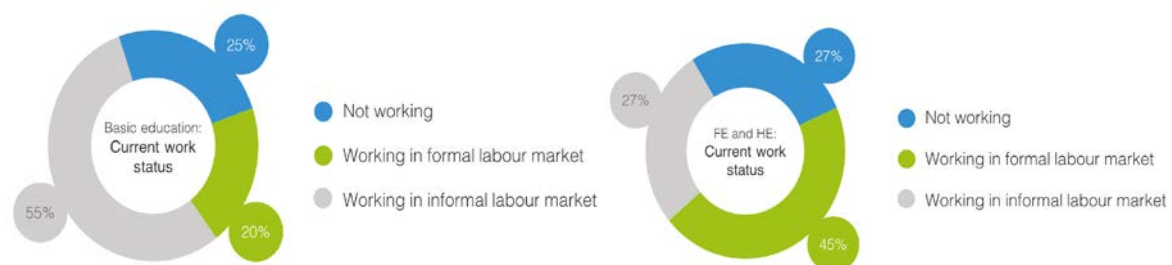
3.3 Socioeconomic integration and wellbeing: the impact of education for Afghan care-leavers

British care-leavers already have poorer employment prospects compared with the general population and are over-represented in the homeless and prison populations (Sebba et al. 2015). Such outcomes are also linked to low levels of educational attainment (Feinstein et al. 2003), and better educational outcomes predict higher earnings and greater likelihood of employment among care-leavers (Okpych and Courtney 2015). Young Afghan care-leavers, then, face multiple layers of potential cumulative disadvantage: their status as care-leavers; their disrupted educational histories and, for many, low educational attainment in the UK; and the emotional and mental health difficulties reportedly present in more than half the refugee population (UNA-UK 2016). In addition to these difficulties, the majority of Afghan care-leavers must also navigate the specific challenges of living with precarious immigration status. This section of this paper examines a set of outcomes for Afghan care-leavers, exploring the extent to which level of education achieved influences their socioeconomic wellbeing. At each level of education, we explore: whether or not young people have been able to obtain work; whether the work is in the formal or informal labour market; whether their education contributed to their securing of employment; the level at which they are paid; their future work aspirations; and the perceived and experienced barriers to achieving said aspirations.

3.3.1 Access to employment

Across the UK, 76 per cent of people with Level 2 qualifications (five GCSEs at grades A*–C) and 48 per cent of those with no qualifications at all are in formal employment (ONS 2011b). Gaining educational qualifications beyond GCSEs predictably corresponds to better socioeconomic outcomes in the general population of the UK, with the employment rate for those with A-levels 7 per cent higher than for those with GCSEs only (ONS 2011b). At the higher education level, in 2016, 88 per cent of graduates and 87.3 per cent of postgraduates were employed in the formal labour market (DfE 2017a).

Figure 10: Current work status of Afghan care-leavers, by level of UK education achieved (focus group and interview participants)



Source: Authors' illustration based on focus group and interview data.

Among the Afghan care-leavers interviewed for this paper, formal employment levels are notably lower than national averages for people with a similar level of qualifications, with only 20 per cent of those with basic education and 45 per cent of those with further and higher education working

in the formal labour market (Figure 10). Obtaining a higher level of education did not reduce the likelihood of being out of work for the Afghan care-leavers consulted, with 25 per cent of those with basic education and 27 per cent of those with further or higher education out of work.

Access to the formal labour market among respondents, however, did increase significantly with level of education obtained. In part this is explained by the higher frequency of immigration statuses that accord the right to work among the group with further- and higher-level education (See Annex 2). Nonetheless, it is not entirely accounted for by this, as several respondents with the right to work in the basic education cohort reported choosing to remain in the informal labour market, despite having the right to work legally. Professionals across all three regions confirmed this, explaining that, as a result of delays obtaining a status with the right to work,

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

Another confirmed that several Afghan care-leavers they had worked with, particularly those who had obtained status as a result of submitting a fresh asylum claim after their appeal rights had been exhausted,

had got so used to working illegally, and didn't understand about paying taxes, didn't understand the system, just used to money going straight into their pocket ... and now one is in trouble because he's been found out. He says he wishes he'd known how to make that transition, but he didn't understand. (KIILondon1)

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

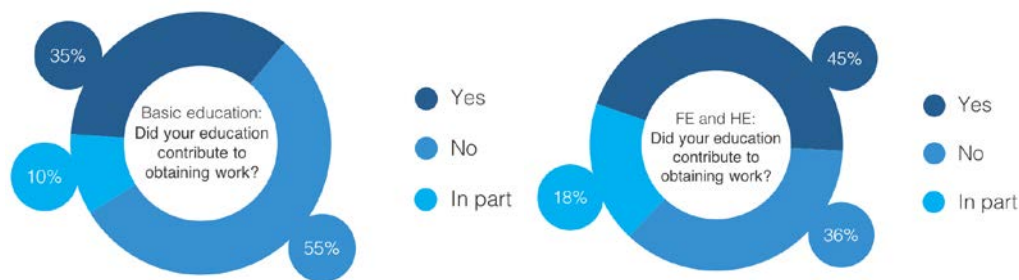
Among Afghan care-leavers, the perception that education contributes to obtaining work increases with level of education achieved (Figure 11). Where only basic-level qualifications had been achieved, over half of respondents (55 per cent) stated that their education had not helped or would not help them find work. The primary reason given for this was that their work responsibilities did not need any skills gained in college. This was particularly the case in the East Midlands, where the majority of respondents worked, whether formally or informally, within Afghan-run businesses where English was not spoken. Multiple young people from this region explained that they did not speak English at work, and had no colleagues who spoke English fluently. Across all regions, the majority of young people with basic-level qualifications explained that they did not need to write in English at work, and so the literacy skills they were gaining at college were of no interest to their employers. However, when education was perceived to have contributed to obtaining employment, it was precisely as a result of having improved written and spoken English skills, and, in a few cases, basic numeracy. The value of education for work was felt most strongly among young people working in the formal labour market, who were more frequently, though not entirely, working in roles that involved interacting with non-Afghans.

Among those with further or higher education qualifications, a positive correlation between education and work was more clearly articulated, with only 36 per cent of respondents stating that it had not helped them, and 63 per cent stating that it had at least partially contributed to their obtaining work. Half of those with or studying for university degrees reported doing work that

enabled them to ‘put my education into practice’ (YPLondon1A) or ‘use the technical skills I have gained at university’ (YPSouthEastE), and others spoke of being assisted by the soft skills they had gained in ‘communication’ and ‘confidence’ (YPLondon1D; YPSouthEastD). For those with university-level education who stated that education had not helped them find work, this was linked exclusively to immigration status, and applied to those studying on scholarships or fee waivers while still asylum seekers without the right to work. These young people reported working informally in order to support their education, with one explaining:

Nothing at my job was related to my education. Actually, working was making my English worse—I was speaking Farsi and not talking to anyone in English and so not practising it. I worked in a fish shop for a while, which is where I learnt a lot of English as I was speaking with different people. My job helped with my education because I was able to financially support myself to buy books and travel across London, but my education did not help work. I was learning English at college and it was frowned upon when I spoke English in the restaurant as everyone spoke Farsi, so I had to learn how to speak Farsi when my language is Pashto. (YPLondon1B)

Figure 11: Perceived contribution of education to obtaining work, by level of UK education achieved (focus group and interview participants)



Source: Authors' illustration based on focus group and interview data.

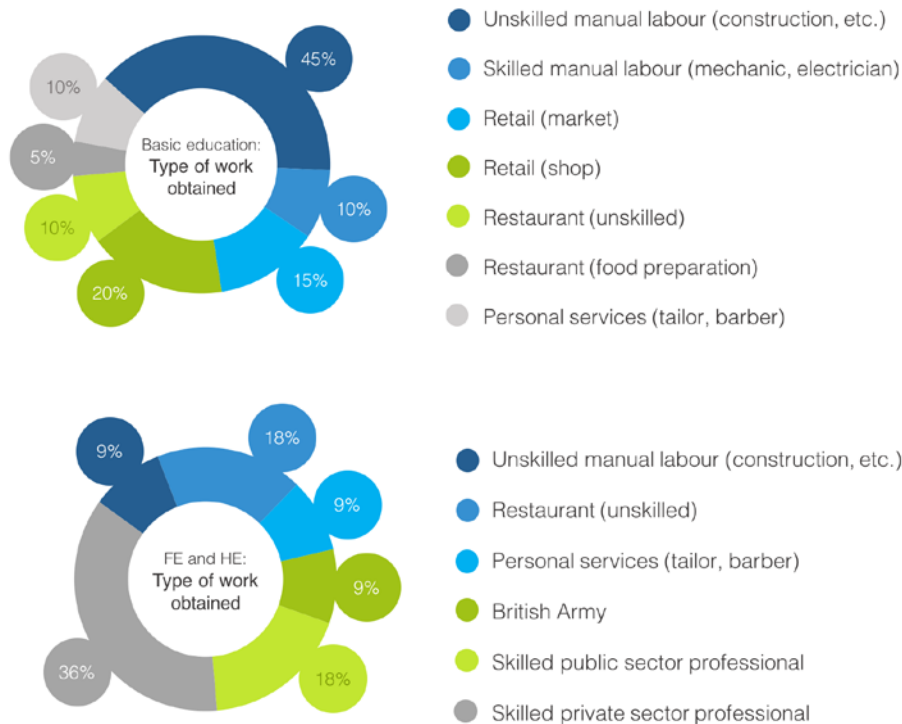
3.3.2 Type of work and remuneration

The majority of Afghan care-leavers with no or entry-level qualifications are working in unskilled manual labour, primarily in the construction industry, in scrapyards, or in restaurants, for companies or establishments owned by other Afghans. Among those with Level 1–2 and GCSE qualifications, the type of work undertaken diversifies slightly, but remains low-skilled work on market stalls, in shops (most frequently phone shops, again owned by other Afghans, or Pakistanis), and in personal services or restaurants. Those with slightly higher-level basic qualifications more frequently report undertaking roles that involve engaging with customers (Figure 12).

At the higher levels, data suggest that the socioeconomic premium of a degree has reduced in recent years, as a result of increasing levels of participation in higher education (ONS 2011c). However, as an increasingly standard essential requirement for many jobs, a degree is still a significant determiner of socioeconomic success, and in 2016, 65 per cent of working-age graduates were in high-skilled employment, compared with only 16.6 per cent of non-graduates (DfE 2017a). As with the general population, there is a positive correlation between level of qualification gained and skill level of work obtained for Afghan care-leavers, with 54 per cent of

those consulted with further- or higher-level qualifications working in skilled roles in the public or private sector (Figure 12). Where those with, or studying for, higher education qualifications remain working in unskilled manual labour, this is as a result of their immigration status restricting them to work within the informal economy.

Figure 12: Type of work obtained by Afghan care-leavers, by level of UK education achieved (focus group and interview participants)

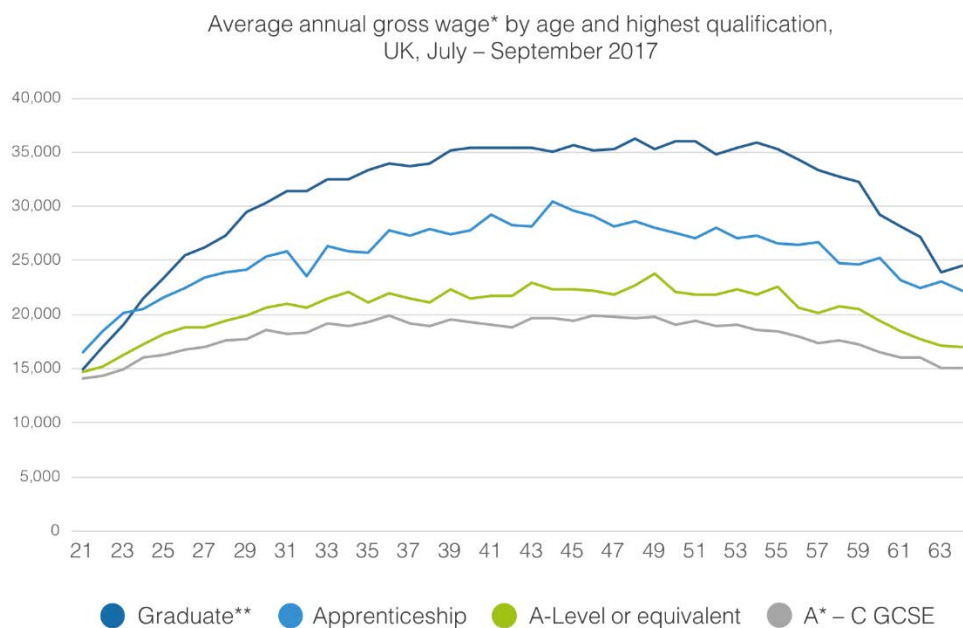


Source: Authors' illustration based on focus group and interview data.

Remuneration for Afghan care-leavers

The minimum wage in the UK is £7.05 per hour, and, in recognition of the higher costs of living in the capital, a London Living Wage of £9.45, while not legally enforced, is recommended. Though it is currently common practice for many employers to offer wages below the national minimum for low-skilled work, the Immigration Act 2016 introduced new measures aimed at enforcing the payment of a national minimum wage (ILPA 2016). Academic qualifications are broadly associated with higher pay in the UK (Figure 13), with average annual gross wages for young people aged 21–25 ranging from circa £14,000 for those with qualifications up to Level 2 (A*–C GCSE equivalent) to circa £23,000 for graduates (ONS 2013).

Figure 13: UK wages, by age and highest qualification



Notes: * Medians are adjusted using average weekly earnings such that they are in terms of 2016 salaries. The average annual gross wages do not include the wages of those who are self-employed. ** A graduate is defined as a person who is aged 21–64, is not enrolled on any educational course, and has a level of higher education above A-level standard.

Source: Authors' illustration based on Labour Force Survey Datasets, Office for National Statistics.

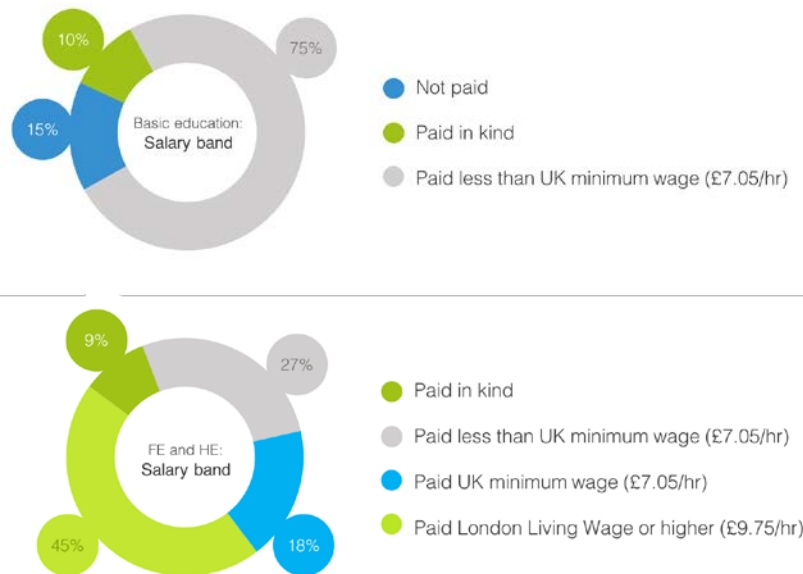
Although remuneration for the Afghan care-leavers consulted does improve with each level of education achieved (Figure 14), it remains significantly below the national averages, at every level of educational qualification. At the basic level of education, and across all regions, not a single respondent, including those working formally with GCSE-level (or equivalent) qualifications, was paid the UK minimum wage. Remuneration was particularly low in the East Midlands (where, as noted above, the majority of respondents are working in Afghan-run businesses where they are not expected to either write or speak English), with the level of pay most frequently cited £3 per hour. One professional from this region explained that this was often accepted by the young Afghans he knew, because:

£2 or £3 an hour is a normal starting wage for informal work in this region—for those who are unskilled, illiterate ... they then gradually build up their skills and climb up the levels to £60 or even £100 a day—almost like an illegal internship. They see that there are others in the Afghan community who have done their time on low wages, and are now earning well, so they just earn their £20 a day and live on that, gradually working their way up ... life is hard but because of the close community they tend to get by. (KIIEastMidlands1)

The highest-paid respondents in the basic education category were those working formally, who were paid between £5.50 and £6.50 per hour. For those working informally, pay ranged from £2 per hour to £6.25 per hour. A minority of respondents, typically in the informal economy, were not paid a salary but were paid in kind with food, travel cards, and occasionally accommodation. Others in the informal economy were not paid at all, but worked nonetheless in the hope that once

they had gained experience they would start to be paid. Inability to negotiate salary was repeatedly expressed by young people in London and the South East, who, despite reported dissatisfaction with their pay, said that they ‘can’t ask for a raise’ (YPLondon1A), typically because ‘there are other people he can get to do it’ (YPSouthEastB) or ‘I don’t have the papers so he can pay what he likes’ (YPLondonE). One professional in London told of a young person who was indeed fired as a result of questioning his low pay (£2 per hour) (KIILondon3), and others across all regions spoke of the power imbalance generally present when young people are either working informally, or working formally but with limited English, confidence, or family support.

Figure 14: Remuneration for working Afghan care-leavers, by UK level of education achieved (focus group and interview participants)



Source: Authors’ illustration based on focus group and interview data.

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

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

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

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

worked with, ‘there is a total incomprehension that they might have critical education, medical or legal appointments or somehow other things they need to do’ (KIIILondon1), and another commented that the young Afghans ‘work long hours, hard work ... but are paid very less [sic]. I see lots of cases of this in last few years’ (KIIIEastMidlands2).

At the further and higher education levels, remuneration improves significantly for Afghan care-leavers. Though some (9 per cent) are still only paid in kind, and a significant minority (27 per cent) are paid less than the UK minimum wage of £7.05 per hour, these two categories are made up entirely of those who, despite studying at a higher level, do not have the right to work and so remain in the informal economy. Among those with the right to work, all are paid at the minimum wage or above, with the majority paid the London Living Wage or higher (whether or not they are based in London). There is, then, among those consulted, a significant positive correlation between level of education and salary for those with the right to work—most likely as a result of the increased ability of those with higher levels of education to transition into the formal labour market upon gaining the right to work. Nonetheless, despite a tendency towards studying high-earning degree subjects,¹⁵ the vast majority of the Afghan care-leavers consulted were still paid by the hour, with only one respondent able to report an annual salary rather than a by-the-hour rate.

Workplace conditions were also less of a concern for those educated at a higher level, with one young person explaining his experience that,

the more the person is educated, the more he is aware of the system, so they get the job with the right people, so with reputable companies, so if you are working with a reputable company they don’t just treat you, you know, badly.
(YPSouthEastE)

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

I had a job that wasn’t good, I wasn’t comfortable there, the people weren’t good ... so I moved to this different restaurant ... the people there are better people, I am paid more. I feel like this is a better one for me until I get my papers.
(YPLondon1B)

And a professional confirmed that:

at [the higher education] level, they have more confidence, and better communication skills, or maybe just understand more that even the informal economy has levels of conditions—I see more young people able to negotiate hours that means they fit work around their studies than at the lower levels where they sometimes just drift out of education because of this sense that they have to work all the hours they are asked to. (KIIILondon6)

¹⁵ In 2016, graduates that had studied science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects on average had higher median salaries than the graduate population as a whole, and those who studied law, economics, and management (LEM) subjects earned, on average, a further £2000 more per annum (DfE 2017a). All but one of the respondents at this level were studying or had studied one of these subjects.

3.3.3 Future aspirations and barriers to socioeconomic wellbeing

There is a notable gap between the type of work the majority of young Afghans are currently undertaking and the type of work they wish to access, even among those with higher education qualifications (Figure 15).

At the basic education level, the majority of respondents working in unskilled manual labour aspire, in the main, simply to the skilled version of the job they are currently doing, or to be, as one young person explained, ‘a boss’ in their sector—in his case, a boss carpet fitter (YPSouthEastC). One professional confirmed that,

when they have no real qualifications, or just entry-level ESOL for example, they typically aspire to slightly more skilled jobs in the sector they are already working in—this is what they see their more successful friends doing, and they don’t tend to have many role models from their community to show them anything different. (KIIEastMidlands1)

Those working on market stalls or in small shops spoke of plans to ultimately run their own business. Being an employer and running a business seemed to be perceived as a marker of success by young people, who shared aspirations including wanting to ‘make this business more bigger, that’s my plan—buying things and selling, I like these things’ (YPSouthEastG), and ‘having my own company or something like this’ (YPSouthEastB). The importance of prestige in these aspirations was emphasized by the professionals interviewed, who spoke of young people who ‘start market trading, so then they own stalls, and then they want to start employing other people, mostly other young Afghan people’ (KIIEastMidlands2), or who:

say ‘I want to have my own business’ but aren’t able to say much more than that—that doesn’t surprise me culturally, as a lot of successful people in Afghanistan have their own business ... a lot of those clients have not been able to spell out to me what they envisage doing—I think it may be more of a status thing. (KIILondon3)

A significant number of young people spoke of wanting to work in either the charity sector or the public sector. At the basic level, 30 per cent of respondents expressed this desire, and at the further and higher education levels, over half of the young people interviewed (54 per cent) spoke of wanting to work in these sectors. One young person with Level 2 qualifications explained that ‘I want to be police so that I can help society’ (YPLondon2B), and another, with Level 1 qualifications, said that ‘I would like to be doing a charity, a chief, maybe in social services, to help, because I’ve been in that position I can feel their stress when they haven’t had the papers, so it’s good to help them’ (YPSouthEastA). One young person with higher-level qualifications told of wanting to ‘be a human rights activist’, and another explained that:

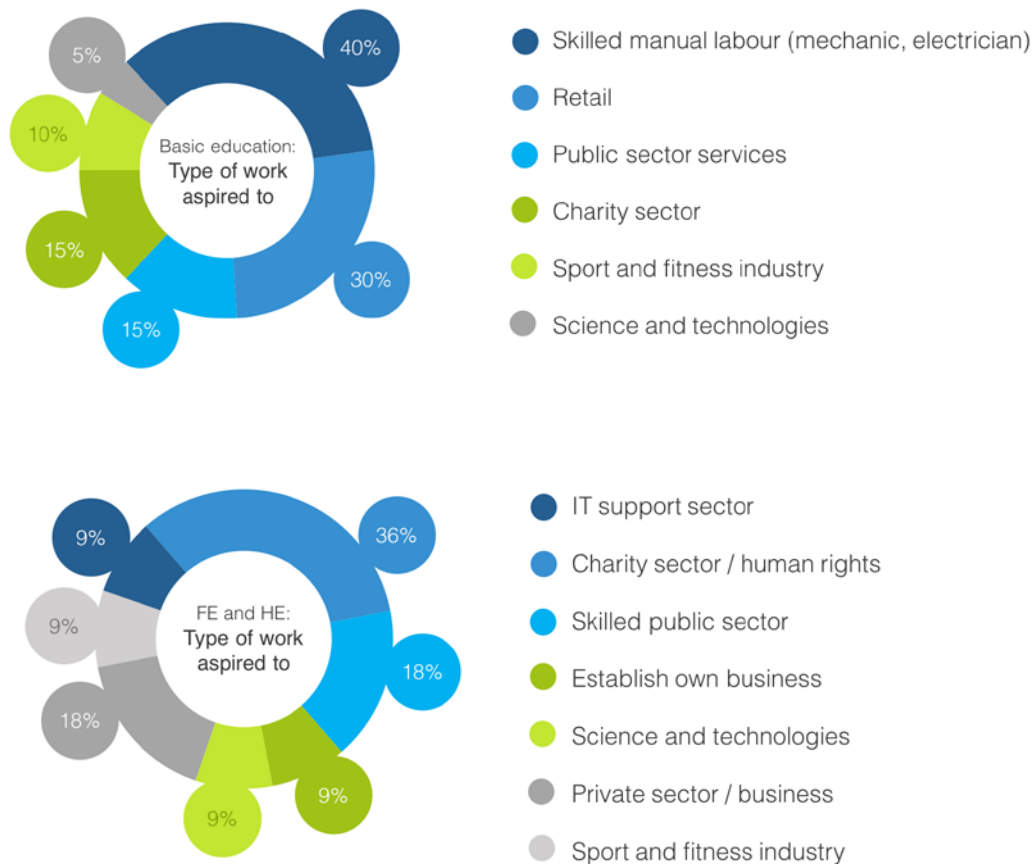
I would like to work for and support others, and so I would like to work for a charity. I realize this is very different to my degree but I would like to help those who are in need. Money is important to survive but that is not my priority. (YPLondon1D)

Several spoke of wanting to one day ‘give back’ to either the UK or Afghanistan. Professionals interviewed also spoke of high levels of young Afghans wanting to work in public services or the charity sector, and suggested that this was perhaps a result of the high level of engagement these young people have typically had with these sectors in the UK—they are therefore areas of work

they understand and may have role models within. One professional explained that many of the Afghan care-leavers they worked with are young people who:

want to make a difference, not just here, but potentially in the future, in the long term, also back home. Which is nice to hear them say, because they say it in a way that is really positive, where they feel that there is potential for significant change in a generation that has been forced away from their homes. (KIIEastMidlands3)

Figure 15: Labour market aspirations among Afghan care-leavers, by level of UK education achieved



Source: Authors' illustration based on focus group and interview data.

Despite these aspirations and plans, the Afghan care-leavers consulted identified numerous barriers to their future socioeconomic wellbeing (Figure 16). As with the barriers to educational progression, immigration status and mental health were the most frequently identified, with finance (typically to fund further study, cover business start-up costs, or afford appropriate accommodation) and a lack of social capital also notable.

Immigration status was identified as the primary barrier to socioeconomic wellbeing by Afghan care-leavers, including by several with refugee status. One young person explained that 'I have refugee status, but my five years are almost finished, so I can work but because I can't say what will happen after that some jobs don't really want me. How can I take a three year contract?' (YPLondon3A). Another, awaiting a decision on his application to extend his original discretionary

leave explained that despite still having the right to work,¹⁶ his complex paperwork deterred prospective employers. He said, ‘now it’s OK I can work but some people say my papers they don’t understand. They are scared of fine’ (YPSouthEastC). Others with status recalled the years waiting, and reflected that the time lost would likely always disadvantage them. Those studying at a higher level while still seeking asylum (one of whom has now been in the UK without a stable form of status for nine years) spoke of their constant awareness of the ultimate possibility of forced removal from the country, and the ‘stress’, ‘fear’, ‘mental exhaustion’, and ‘anxiety’ that provoked. One young person told his story of completing university, but finding that his immigration status:

is stopping me from leading a normal life, for example being able to work, being able to pursue other opportunities, going forward, I wouldn’t even have studied at university if it wasn’t for the scholarship award. My education level is fine—it is only the immigration situation which is limiting me ... Over summer break, after my degree I was offered jobs but I couldn’t accept because employers were too scared to take me on. I would tell them they could pay for my expenses and pay me in vouchers instead of giving me a salary but they said the risk was too big. They were so scared for the legal consequences. (YPLondon3B)

Despite their high-level qualifications, the young people said that they were ‘not excited for the future, because of my lack of documents’ (YPLondon1B); that ‘with temporary status I can’t plan for the future’ (YPLondon2C); and that:

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

At the basic education level, immigration status was also the primary barrier to workplace progression, and was also reported to both cause and exacerbate mental health problems, which then in turn were seen as preventing young people from achieving their goals. Professionals told of ‘many young Afghans not working because they are not well enough’ (KIISouthEast1), of ‘lack of sleep, lack of focus, worrying and trauma’ (KIIEastMidlands2). These symptoms were said to be present in particular in:

young people who have been refused and gone into the long and drawn-out appeals process—that does have an impact on their mental health, they can’t put down their roots and build a life for themselves, everything is on hold, that raises levels of anxiety and makes it very hard to work in the way they want. (KIILondon5)

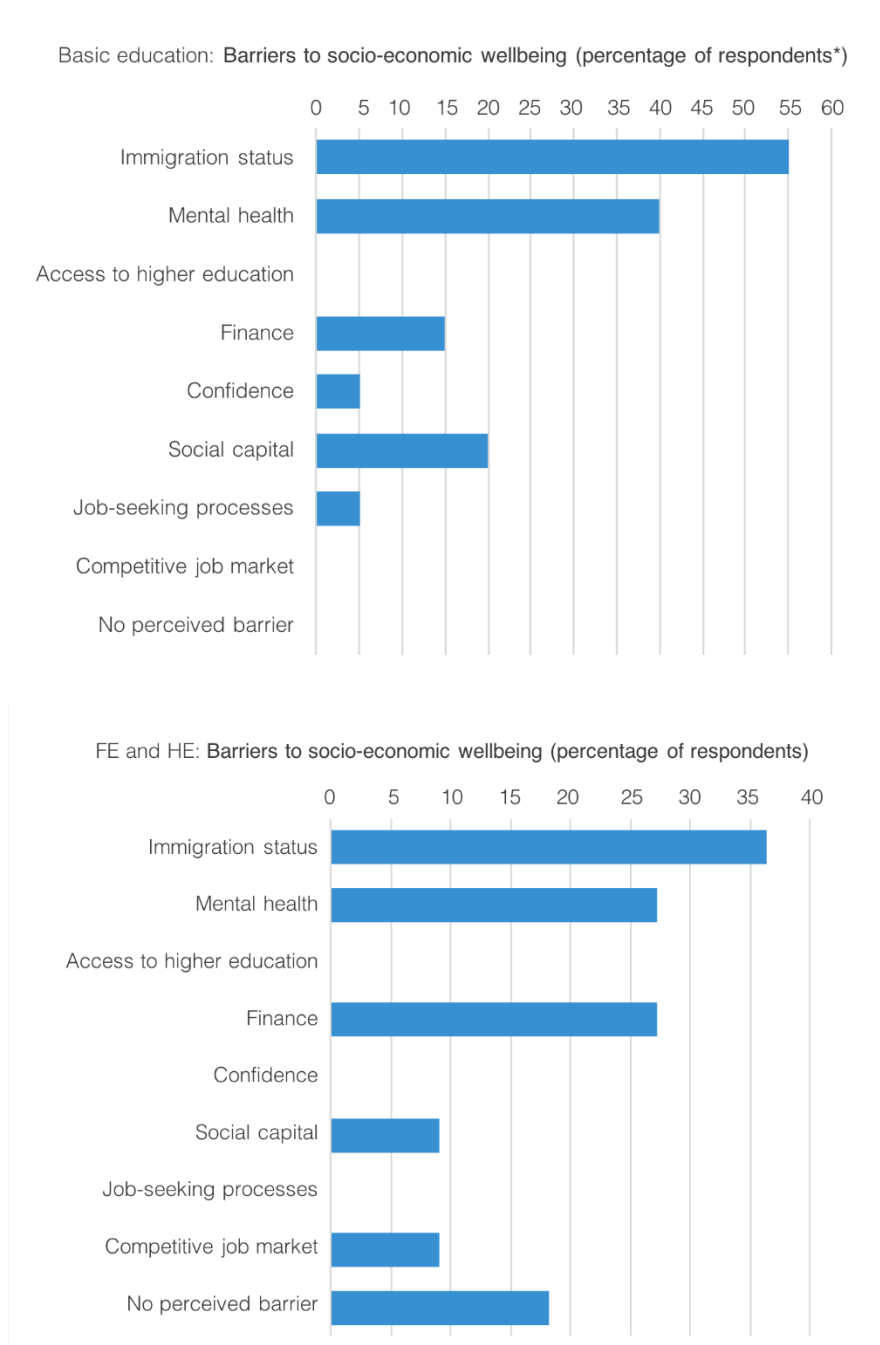
For those with stable forms of immigration status, the remaining barriers identified were linked broadly to social capital, with young people lacking contacts and connections in the industries they wished to work in (the charity sector being the one exception). This limited their ability to obtain relevant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

¹⁶ Young people with discretionary leave to remain (DLR) have the right to work in the UK. Those whose DLR has expired, and who are still awaiting a response on their application for an extension of their leave retain the right to work until they receive a negative decision from the Home Office. However, the only way to evidence this is with a letter from a solicitor to accompany an out-of-date visa. Many employers do not accept this, despite its legal validity.

and management. Others told of wanting to up-skill in particular areas, but not having the finances to cover the cost of the training they felt would lead to greater economic wellbeing in future.

One small group (18 per cent of those with higher and further education qualifications) stated that there was no barrier to their progress. Every individual who stated this had either completed studying or was currently studying at degree level, and had either refugee status or indefinite leave to remain, suggesting again that it is the combination of higher-level education qualifications and a stable form of status that gives Afghan care-leavers the opportunity to flourish in the UK, and not higher education alone.

Figure 16: Perceived barriers to socioeconomic progress and wellbeing among Afghan care-leavers, by level of UK education achieved



Note: * Some respondents cited more than one barrier. Source: Authors' illustration based on focus group and interview data.

4 Conclusions

The data analysed for this report suggest that while there is a positive correlation between higher levels of education and improved socioeconomic outcomes for Afghan care-leavers across regions of England, the impact of precarious immigration status in the lives of so many of this group limits, or in some cases entirely negates, the benefits of education.

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

However, we have demonstrated that living without stable immigration status in the UK is a key feature of the experience of Afghan care-leavers in England: a significant majority find themselves in this situation (Figures 2 and 3). There is, therefore, a notable group of young care-leavers in the UK who, as a result of their immigration status, are not able to transition into ‘secure and settled futures’, as is hoped for care-leavers more broadly (HM Government 2014). When these young people are forcibly returned to Afghanistan after reaching 18, outcomes are poor at best, with young people facing significant violence, high levels of destitution, severe mental health difficulties, and notable barriers to entering any kind of education or employment (Gladwell et al. 2016). When they remain living in protracted limbo in the UK, with the formal labour market out of reach, this group of care-leavers are, and become increasingly, vulnerable to mental health issues, exploitative work conditions, and a growing sense of powerlessness and frustration—even when they have achieved high levels of education. The state also loses out: we have seen that the majority of these young people aspire to do meaningful work, to contribute to society, and in many cases to proactively seek work that improves the lives of others—and yet they are prevented from doing so.

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

It is beyond the scope of this article to suggest specific immigration reforms that might alleviate these challenges. However, it is clear that in an increasingly restrictive immigration policy environment, further research would be useful into what actions statutory and charitable organizations might take in order to minimize harm to these young people. In particular, these findings may lead a reader to assume that the value of education for these young people is minimal where stable immigration status is not obtained—in that they are not able to convert their education into well-paid employment within the formal sector. However, the majority of young people with precarious immigration status repeatedly spoke about how important education was to them—this despite their inability to access the labour market and their uncertain futures. As the UK Home Office introduces new measures to restrict access to education for asylum seekers,

those submitting fresh claims, and those who have exhausted the appeals process,¹⁷ further research into the non-employment-related benefits of education for former UASC would be welcomed. While the data collected for this article find that immigration status is the key determiner of socioeconomic wellbeing for Afghan care-leavers, the psychosocial benefit of participating in education for former UASC and its contribution to their broader sense of belonging and wellbeing is accepted anecdotally within the refugee youth practitioner community. The study restrictions being introduced at the time of writing suggest this may now need to be examined from an evidence-based, systematic perspective if young people already prevented from accessing the formal labour market are to avoid being permanently prevented from also accessing education.

¹⁷ As of January 2017, these groups of people, including care-leavers, may be issued with new 'no study' conditions. These conditions are part of new forms known as Bail 201 forms and have begun to be issued to young people known to the authors in the last few weeks.

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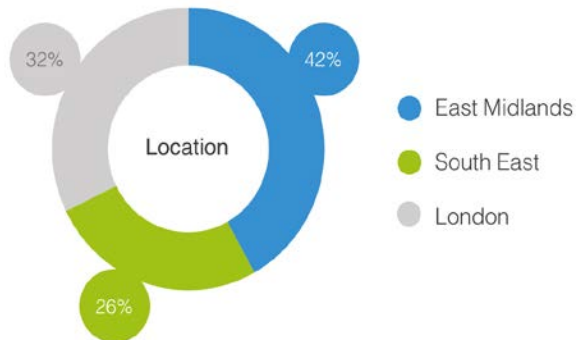
Annex 1: Freedom of Information request

Submitted by Catherine Gladwell and Jennie Thomas, Refugee Support Network, November 2017.

1. How many of the Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) in the care of your Local Authority identify as Afghan?
2. How many of the care leavers up to the age of 24 in the care of your Local Authority identify as Afghan?
3. How many of the care leavers up to the age of 24 who identify as Afghan in the care of your Local Authority have either Refugee Status, Indefinite Leave to Remain or Humanitarian Protection?
4. How many of the UASC who identify as Afghan in the care of your Local Authority were out of education at the date of their last review?
5. How many of the care leavers up to the age of 21 who identify as Afghan in the care of your Local Authority were out of education at the date of their last review?
6. How many of the UASC who identify as Afghan in the care of your Local Authority had achieved qualifications at i) entry level, ii) Level 1 or 2, iii) Level 3 at the date of their last review?
7. How many of the care leavers up to the age of 24 who identify as Afghan in the care of your Local Authority had achieved qualifications at i) entry level, ii) Level 1 or 2, iii) Level 3, iv) Levels 4–6 at the date of their last review?
8. How many of the care leavers up to the age of 24 in the care of your Local Authority have entered university in the last three years?
9. How many of the care leavers up to the age of 24 who identify as Afghan in the care of your Local Authority have entered university in the last three years?

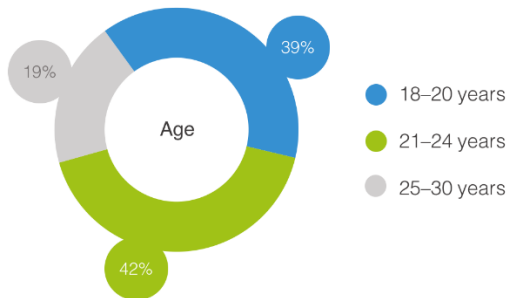
Annex 2: Additional data graphs

Figure A1: Geographical location of focus group and interview respondents



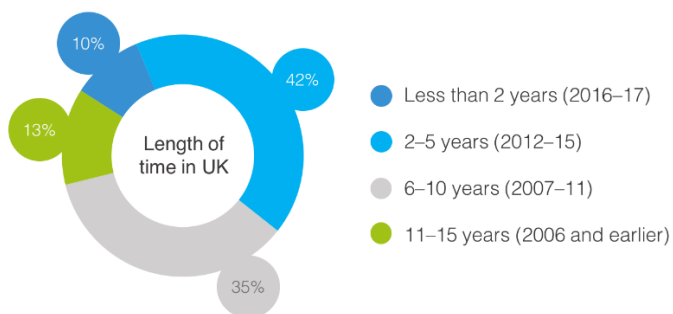
Source: Authors' illustration based on focus group and interview data.

Figure A2: Age of focus group and interview respondents



Source: Authors' illustration based on focus group and interview data.

Figure A3: Length of time in the UK of focus group and interview respondents



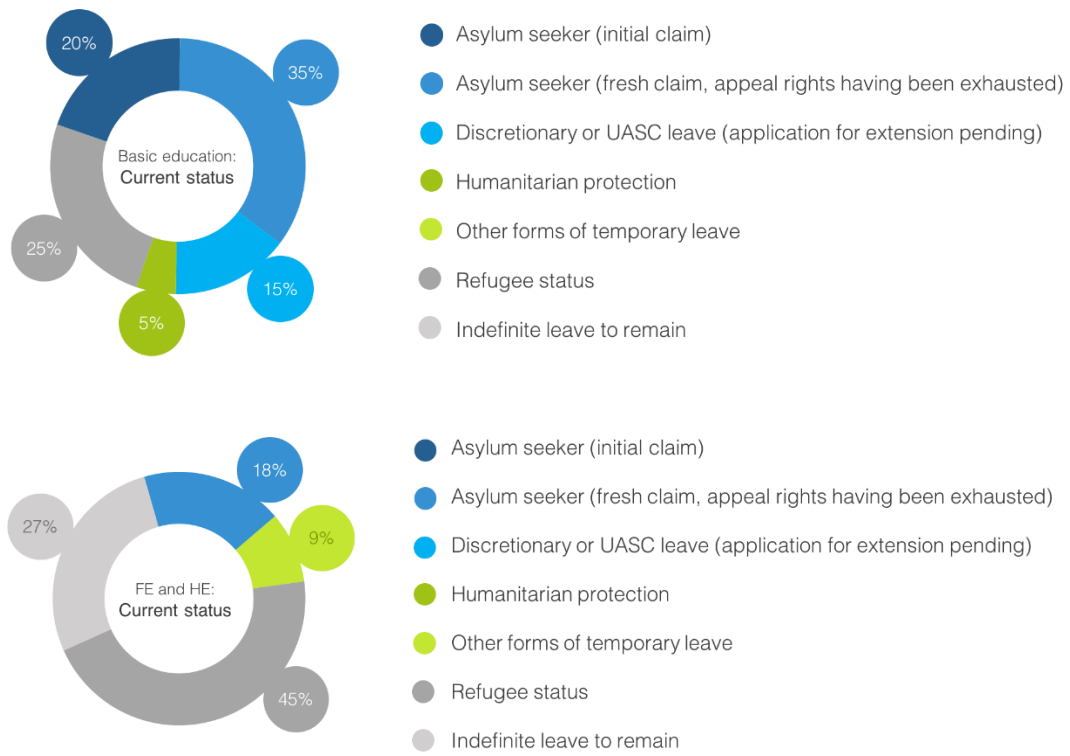
Source: Authors' illustration based on focus group and interview data.

Table A1: Local authorities in England with 10 or more UASC identifying as Afghan (FOI data)

Kent County Council	127	South East
Nottingham City	49	East Midlands
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council	43	West Midlands
Barnet Borough Council	38	London
Harrow Borough Council	35	London
Brent Borough Council	32	London
Northamptonshire Council	31	East Midlands
Warwickshire Council	28	West Midlands
Waltham Forest Borough Council	23	London
Staffordshire County Council	22	West Midlands
Hertfordshire County Council	19	East
Gloucestershire County Council	16	South West
Hampshire County Council	15	South East
West Sussex County Council	15	South East
Haringey Borough Council	14	London
Milton Keynes City Council	14	South East
Leicestershire County Council	14	East Midlands
Suffolk County Council	13	East
Hillingdon Borough Council	12	London
Coventry City Council	10	West Midlands
Lincolnshire County Council	10	East Midlands
Thurrock Council	10	East
Peterborough City Council	10	East

Source: Authors' illustration based on data obtained through FOI requests to LAs.

Figure A4: Immigration status of focus group and interview participants, by UK education level achieved



Source: Authors' illustration based on focus group and interview data.