



University  
of Glasgow

Policy Scotland

BUILDING FUTURES



# Building a New Life in Britain: The Skills, Experiences and Aspirations of Young Syrian Refugees

POLICY REPORT

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## About the *Building Futures* Project

The project which informs this report is entitled *Building Futures: Aspirations of Syrian Youth Refugees and Host Population Responses in Lebanon, Greece and the UK*. It runs from November 2016 to August 2018, and is supported by the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), a £1.5 billion fund announced by the UK government to encourage research which addresses challenges faced by developing countries. The funding is part of the budget for the Department for International Development and is administered through various UK-based funding bodies. *Building Futures* was part of a group of projects addressing the problems of forced displacement, funded jointly through the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) (award reference: ES/P005179/1).



The *Building Futures* research project provides the most comprehensive assessment of the skills, training needs, work aspirations, lived experiences, and ethical perspectives of young Syrian forced migrants as they attempt to rebuild their lives in three host countries: a neighbouring host state (Lebanon), the main entry point to Europe (Greece), and a north European destination state (the United Kingdom - UK). It is also the first to offer a parallel exploration of the attitudes of host populations towards the displaced people in their midst in the respective countries. It is run by an interdisciplinary research team with expertise spanning economics, education and training, ethics, migration studies, political philosophy, political science, and sociology, and in cooperation with partners SolidarityNow (Greece), Educart –the Center for Educational Consultation and Research (Lebanon) and the Scottish Refugee Council (UK).

The research findings are derived from face-to-face interviews with 1,516 Syrian international protection beneficiaries and applicants, aged between 18 and 32. The fieldwork was conducted in Lebanon (532 interviews), Greece (500 interviews) and the UK (484 interviews) between April and October 2017, by trained researchers and with the support of our partners. This first project report mainly focusses on this part of the fieldwork, exploring experiences, skills, training needs and work aspirations of young, forcibly displaced Syrians and their implications for policy.

The second part of our fieldwork sought to capture the corresponding attitudes of citizens in the three host states, Lebanon, Greece and the UK. Representative surveys of home populations in the three countries, administered between October 2017 and April 2018, provided data on citizens' aspirations and ideals, attitudes to refugees, and priorities for refugee policies. A full analysis of this part of the project is included in a final report, currently in preparation.

Indeed, although this report is based on our survey with young refugees, the *Building Futures* project gives equal attention to the attitudes and preferences of citizens. Its overarching aim is to help overcome the perceived antagonism between the two groups, citizens and refugees, and promote consensus and cross-community understanding in a context of strained public resources and anti-immigration sentiment.

This policy report was prepared for dissemination at the Scottish Parliament Symposium: 'Refugee Politics: Trade-Offs and Dilemmas', 15 June 2018. If you would like to receive our final project report or for any further information about the project, the questionnaires used in the fieldwork, or its findings, please see [www.RefugeePolitics.net](http://www.RefugeePolitics.net) or contact the Principal Investigator, Georgios Karyotis at [georgios.karyotis@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:georgios.karyotis@glasgow.ac.uk).

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## Executive Summary

This report, the first of the project, presents original research evidence based on 1,516 face-to-face interviews with young Syrian international protection beneficiaries and applicants, 18-32 years old, which were conducted in the UK, Lebanon and Greece, between April and October 2017. Key findings from this comparative analysis inform our policy recommendations concerning the settlement, training and skills provision for young forced migrants in the UK.

### *Key Findings:*

- Young Syrian refugees in the UK have the highest levels of skills and training, and are most eager to remain and contribute to the host country, compared with those in Greece and Lebanon.
- Young Syrian refugees are faced with higher levels of unemployment in the UK than citizens, while many of them who are in employment are doing jobs for which they are over-qualified.
- Refugees in the UK receive better support and have an overall more positive experience and evaluation of actors compared to those in Greece and Lebanon, but access to key provisions designed to enhance labour market participation remains patchy.
- Syrian refugees who have been resettled to the UK report overall more positive experiences than those coming through the asylum route, despite higher levels of employment among the latter and the government supposedly taking the more vulnerable among the former.
- Young Syrians in Scotland are better supported, and more positive about their engagement with people and institutions, although they are currently more distanced from re-integration into the labour market compared to those settled in England.

Our *key policy recommendations*, derived from these findings, are:

- A.** Policy makers and influencers should communicate much clearer to the general public both why refugees flee their country, as well as what contributions they are able and eager to make once they reach the United Kingdom.
- B.** The UK government should invest in the education and training of young refugees, prioritising access to entry-level ESOL courses. Assistance in reconstructing people's educational records, or in providing recognition of previous qualifications/accreditation, would help remove a key factor explaining the significant under-utilisation of high skills in the refugee workforce.
- C.** There is a need for authorities at all levels to concentrate time and resources to encourage, facilitate and coordinate the provision of services designed to improve refugees' understanding of how the labour market and job application process work in the UK. The private sector should engage with this population as a potential workforce, recognising and utilising their skills.
- D.** The existing two-tier refugee support system, based on the mode of entry to the UK, produces inequalities in the experiences of and support for young Syrians. All refugees should have the same social provisions to support their integration, based on the refugee resettlement model.
- E.** If the aim of refugee policy is to facilitate settlement, rather than forced self-reliance, then the support offered to refugees in Scotland should be emulated across the UK, to confront the inequalities of the current system. Alternatively, providing the Scottish Parliament with greater jurisdiction concerning the welfare and settlement of those forcibly displaced would bring clear benefits for those settled in Scotland.

The UK is signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, which commits its parties to granting international protection to persons with well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. While it is clear from our findings that Syrian refugees are both well-educated and skilled, it is not these characteristics, but the conditions that force people flee, that make a refugee a refugee. A system that creates multiple and arbitrary tiers of support to vulnerable and equally deserving populations does not only undermine its effectiveness but also potentially clashes with the country's international legal obligations.

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## Introduction

Since the onset of the civil war in 2011, it is estimated that more than 12 million Syrians have been forced to flee their homes 'making Syria the largest displacement crisis globally'.<sup>1</sup> Of these, the majority have been internally displaced by violence, while more than 5.6 million have registered as refugees, mostly in neighbouring countries Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraqi Kurdistan, and more recently in Europe, where over a million asylum applications had been lodged by April 2016. The crisis has not only reversed all twelve Millennium Development Goals indicators for Syria, including a contraction of its national economy by 40% and a decrease of life expectancy by over 20 years, it has also undermined, to varying degrees, stability and social cohesion in receiving states that often lack the required resources, the political and public will, or both, to support those in desperate need.<sup>2</sup>

Our case studies capture three different arenas for this ongoing crisis: a neighbouring host state (Lebanon), the main entry point to Europe (Greece), and a north European destination state (the UK). Despite its small size, population (4.5 million) and limited resources, Lebanon is a host to more than 1 million registered Syrian refugees. This has led to lower incomes and a reduction of job opportunities, including for Lebanese workers. In response, international reports have highlighted the importance of skills training and job creation for both refugees and host workers alike.<sup>3</sup> Greece has since 2010 been experiencing a deep economic crisis, relying on external bailouts and facing a 26% unemployment rate, which jumps to over 50% for those under 25 years old, three times the EU average.<sup>4</sup> Despite these dire economic conditions, Greece is one of the main transit country of refugees to Europe, via Turkey. In 2015-2016, about a million arrived through that route, and many became trapped in Greece, more than half of them Syrians, with limited access to their preferred destination countries in Northern Europe after the adoption of more restrictive policies across Europe.<sup>5</sup> Our third case, the UK, represents one of the preferred destination countries for Syrian refugees.<sup>6</sup> While its national economy is much stronger than the other two cases, it has seen persistent criticism of the adequacy of vocational education and training for young adults<sup>7</sup>, and anti-immigration attitudes have been suggested as a key factor in the victory of the 'Leave' campaign on the EU Referendum in June 2016.<sup>8</sup> In all three cases, therefore, there are significant social, political and economic challenges involved in meeting the needs of refugees, while doing justice to the claims of the host population, many of whom may be analogously disadvantaged themselves.

The immediate priorities of the international community have naturally been to address the refugees' safety and basic needs, such as health care, water, sanitation, food security and shelter. The protracted nature of the Syrian conflict, however, has also directed attention to other areas.<sup>9</sup> Foremost amongst

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<sup>1</sup> OCHA (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) (2016) 'Syrian Arab Republic', United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, p. 1. Accessed 12th July 2018 <http://www.unocha.org/syria>.

<sup>2</sup> OCHA (2016) 'Syrian Arab Republic'.

<sup>3</sup> ILO (International Labour Organisation) (2014) Assessment of the Impact of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon and their Employment Profile 2013. Beirut: International Labour Organisation Regional Office for Arab States. Accessed 12th July 2018. [https://www.ilo.org/beirut/publications/WCMS\\_240134/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/beirut/publications/WCMS_240134/lang--en/index.htm).

<sup>4</sup> Eurostat (2016) Unemployment statistics Eurostat Statistics Explained. Accessed 12th July 2018. [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Unemployment\\_statistics](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Unemployment_statistics).

<sup>5</sup> Skleparis, D. (2017) European Governments' Responses to the 'Refugee Crisis'. *Southeastern Europe*, 41(3), 276-301.

<sup>6</sup> A survey of 637 forced migrants conducted in March 2016 in Athens found that Germany was by far their top preferred destination (68%), followed by Sweden (5.8%), the UK (4.5%), France (4.1%) and the Netherlands (3.4%). See Kapa Research (2016) 'Erevna se Prosfiges' (Face to Face), 16-17 March, 2016. Accessed 12 July 2018. <https://bit.ly/2JAVaUF>.

<sup>7</sup> Sainsbury, D. (2016) Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education. London: Gatsby Foundation. Accessed 12th July 2018. <http://www.gatsby.org.uk/uploads/education/reports/pdf/report-of-the-independent-panel-on-technical-education.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Goodwin, M., & Milazzo, C. (2017) Taking back control? Investigating the role of immigration in the 2016 vote for Brexit. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 19(3), 450-464.

<sup>9</sup> World Bank (2015) Our New Strategy. Accessed 12th July 2018. <http://www.worldbank.org/en/region/mena/brief/our-new-strategy>.



these are policies designed to empower refugees to integrate socially and economically in host societies, at least temporarily, while the ‘push factors’ that forced them to leave their country still persist.<sup>10</sup> Education and skills development is at the heart of these efforts, but the focus has primarily been on the 1.4 million Syrian refugee children in neighbouring host states, half of whom are not in school, with far less academic and policy attention on young adults.<sup>11</sup>

The *Building Futures* project addresses this gap, focussing on a demographic - young refugees, 18 to 32 years old - whose personal development and educational needs are markedly different to the formal curriculum provisions that apply to children, and whose skills are key to economic prosperity.<sup>12</sup> Education, after all, says Aristotle is ‘an ornament in prosperity and a refuge in adversity’; a number of academic studies, as well as NGOs, emphasise this in their policy recommendations for managing the Syrian Refugee Crisis.<sup>13</sup>

In what follows, we discuss a set of key research findings that have to do with young Syrian forced migrants’ existing skills, demographic characteristics and own perspectives on the opportunities and barriers they face in meeting their aspirations. We compare these findings about young Syrian forced migrants across three countries (Lebanon, Greece and the UK). We also explore how these findings vary within the UK (England and Scotland), and between different modes of access to the country (‘Asylum’ and ‘Resettlement’ routes). In each case, we link these research findings to key policy recommendations, and along the way, we highlight instances where our findings debunk prevalent myths about forced migrants in the UK.

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<sup>10</sup> Gibney, M. (2014) ‘Political Theory, Ethics, and Forced Migration’ in E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, G. Loescher, K. Long, and N. Sigona (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

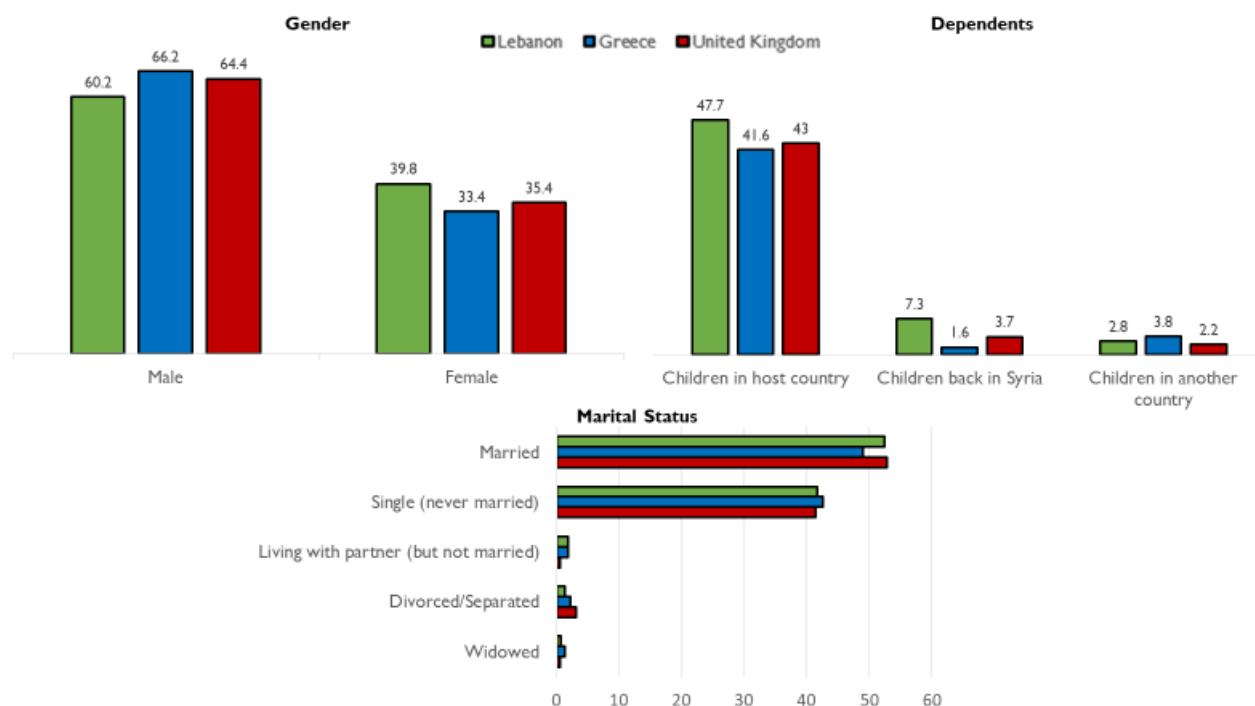
<sup>11</sup> Deane, S. (2016) Syria’s Lost Generation: Refugee Education Provision and Societal Security in an Ongoing Conflict Emergency. In M. Tadros and J. Selby (eds) *Ruptures and Ripple Effects in the Middle East and Beyond*, Institute of Development Studies Bulletin 47(3), 35-52.

<sup>12</sup> In this policy report, unless otherwise specified, we use the term ‘refugee’ signifying persons who have fled armed conflict or persecution. This does not necessarily mean that they have been legally recognised as such by their host states. Indeed, our sample includes 83% legally recognised refugees in the UK, and 12% in Greece. Lebanon, as a non-signatory party of the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951 or its 1967 Protocol, has not adopted any domestic legislation specifically addressing the status of refugees, which is presently determined mainly by the provisions of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed between Lebanon and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In our Lebanon sample, 46% fall into this category. In the UK, which is the main focus of this report, our sample also includes 6% asylum seekers, 3% under temporary protection, and 8% under the ‘Other’ category (e.g. student visa).

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Global Migration Group (2016) Acting together in a world on the move. Accessed 12th July 2018. <http://www.globalmigrationgroup.org/>.

## I. Young Syrian refugees in the UK possess high skills and are eager to contribute

Prior to the outbreak of the civil war in 2011, Syria was recognised as having one of the most advanced educational systems in the region, with almost universal completion of primary school and a secondary school completion rate of 74 percent. Our sampled young Syrians in Greece, Lebanon and the UK are similar in terms of broad demographic features such as age (18-32 years old), gender and family circumstances (See Figure 1).

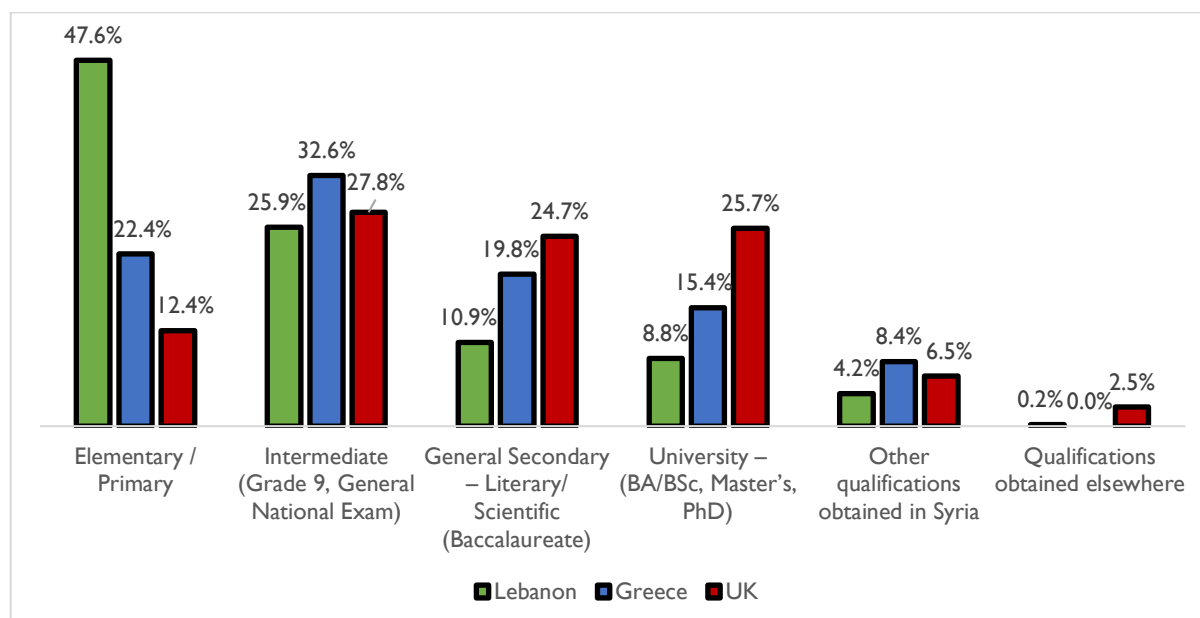


**Figure 1: Demographic profile of young refugees in Lebanon, Greece and the UK (%)**

However, our findings suggest that there is a significant sorting of refugees between host countries, on the basis of skills and qualifications, that is, there are clear patterns as to where refugees end up. Young Syrian refugees in the UK have the highest levels of skills and training, and are most eager to remain and contribute to the host country, compared with those in Greece or Lebanon. This is in line with established understanding of migration patterns, where migration is selective and individuals with higher economic potential (e.g. who are young, well-educated) tend to be more mobile.

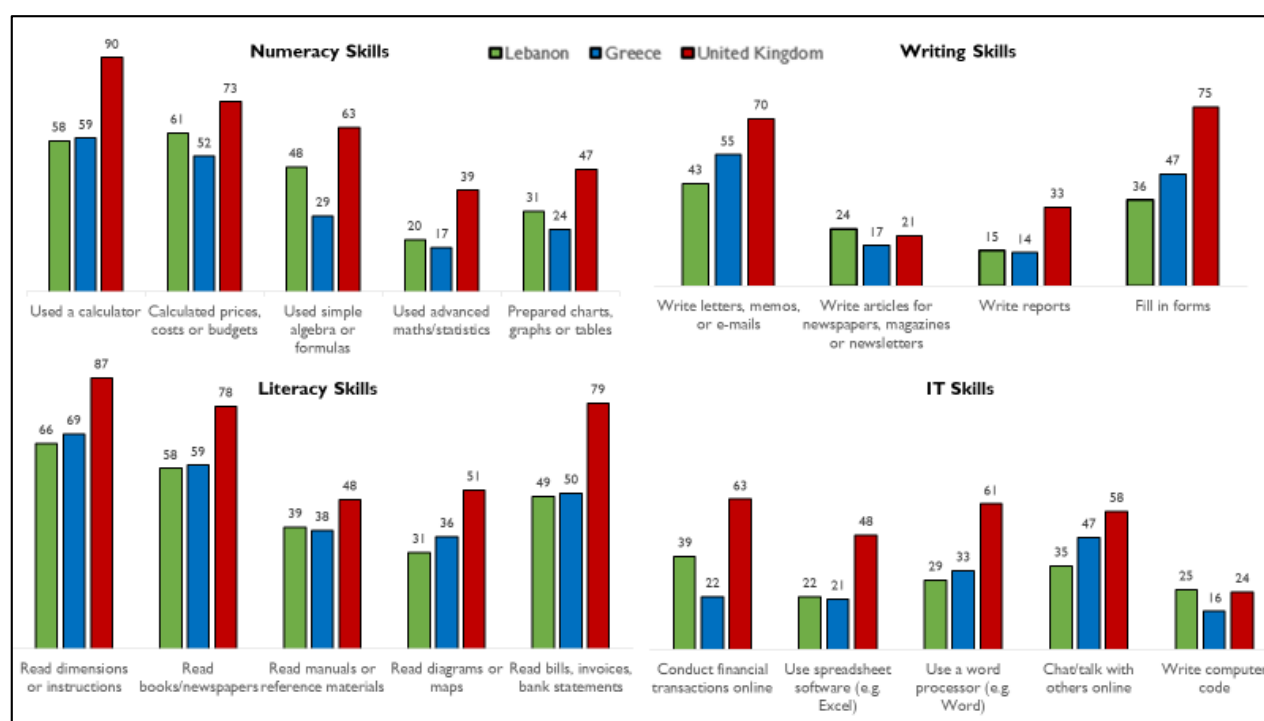
This pattern is evident in Figure 2 below. The majority (47.6%) of respondents in Lebanon have elementary or primary education as their highest qualification. By contrast, 22.4% and only 12.4% of Syrians in Greece and the UK respectively reported elementary or primary education as their highest qualification. The samples are more or less similar when comparing numbers of respondents who have intermediate qualifications. However, the UK sample contained disproportionately more respondents with higher qualifications: 25.7% reported an undergraduate or higher degree as their highest qualification, compared to only 8.8% in Lebanon and 15.4% in Greece.

This sorting is only a general tendency in our sample. We must recognise that there are many highly qualified young Syrians residing both in Lebanon and Greece, and that many young Syrian refugees in the UK possess less than secondary education (40.2%). Indeed, one also has to take into consideration those who didn't manage to complete their education due to the war in their home country: 22.4% in Lebanon, 46.4% in Greece, and 41.3% in the UK. Yet, overall, the statistics do clearly show that, on average, young Syrian refugees in the UK tend to be more highly qualified than their counterparts in Lebanon and Greece.



**Figure 2: Highest qualification attained by refugees in Lebanon, Greece and the UK**

We also asked respondents about the skills they have used in work or private life across five domains: language, numeracy, literacy, computer use, and soft skills. Young Syrian refugees in all three countries exhibit competency in a variety of hard and soft skills, many at an advanced level.



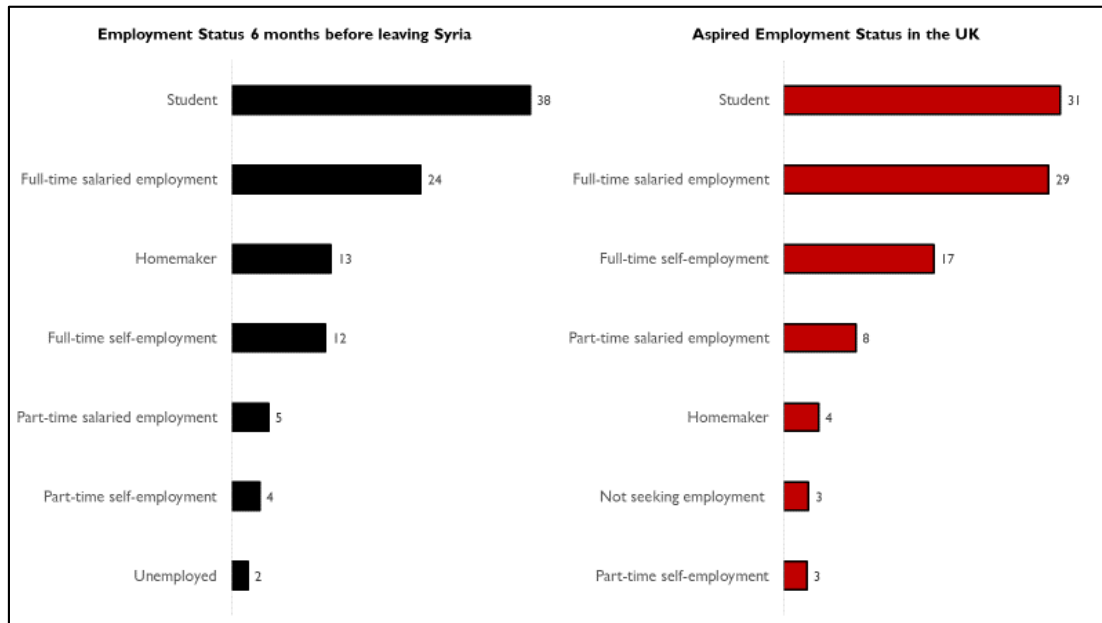
**Figure 3: Comparative numeracy, literacy, writing and I.T skills of young Syrian refugees (%)**

On average, however, those in the UK tend to be more skilled across the board (see Figure 3). Looking at each of those indicators in isolation paints a picture of a tendency towards sorting on ability of Syrian refugees, with the more skilled tending to migrate further away. The picture that emerges is complex, but the overall tendency is that respondents in the UK report higher skills.

Our statistical analysis of these results indicates that general demographic variables (e.g. age, gender, marital status) are not significant when it comes to identifying the probability of young Syrian refugees being in the UK, rather than in Lebanon or Greece. Yet, qualification variables are highly so: possessing



only a primary qualification makes an individual four times *less* likely to be in the UK, but possessing a secondary or tertiary qualification makes someone about two times *more* likely to be in the UK compared to those with intermediate qualifications. Evidently, and contrary to public perceptions, there are many highly qualified young Syrian refugees in the UK, more so than other countries.



**Figure 4: Employment status in Syria and aspired employment status in the UK (%)**

Another persistent public concern is the perception that refugees come to the UK for employment and welfare opportunities, rather than to find refuge. Our findings, here and elsewhere, challenge this assumption as well. According to our survey, the vast majority of young Syrian refugees in our UK sample were either studying (38%) or in employment (45%) six months before they were forced to leave their country. Still, and despite the fact that only 2% of young Syrians were unemployed before leaving their home, media and political frames – often and problematically – portray them as economic migrants, not forcibly displaced ones.

Similarly, the vast majority of those who have now settled in the UK aspire to complete their studies (31%) or be in employment (57%), as *Figure 4* shows. Interestingly, it appears that while 13% were homemakers six months before leaving Syria, a role exclusively reserved to women in our sample, only 4% aspire to be homemakers in the UK. Finally, only 3% of our survey participants are not currently seeking employment, mostly because they are unable to work due to disability, trauma or other vulnerability. Overall, these results emphatically demonstrate that young Syrians in the UK are not only able – given their high skills and qualifications – but are also particularly eager to make a positive contribution to the economy and society of their host state. Publicising such findings may help reduce public anxieties over the economic impact of forced migration in host countries.

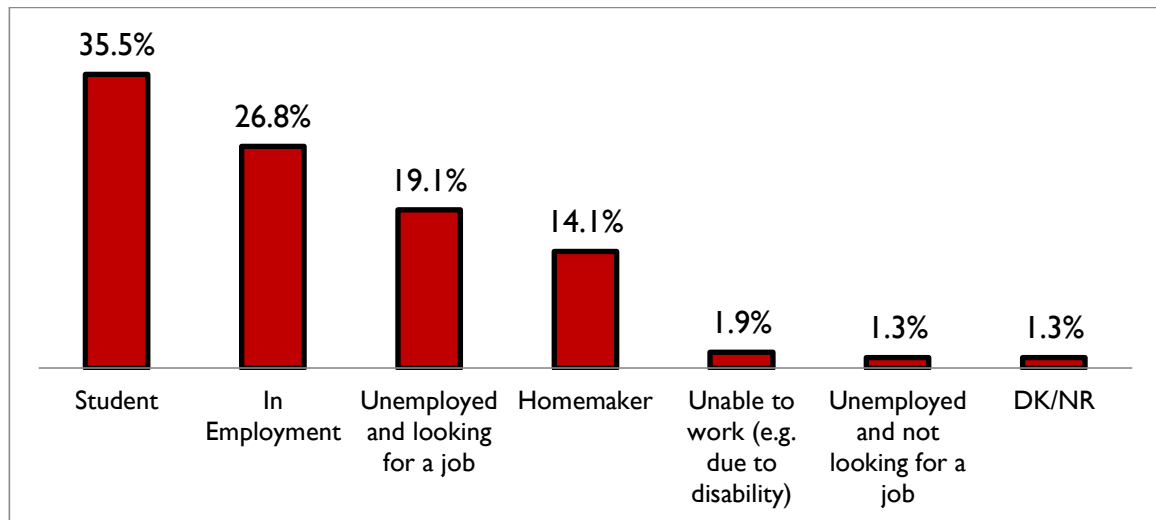
#### **Policy recommendation A.**

Syrian refugees in the UK are highly educated and many have experience of skilled employment. It is incumbent on all levels of government to empower them to apply these skills in the host society.

Policy makers and influencers, including the media and civil society, should communicate much clearer to the general public both why refugees flee their country, as well as what contributions they are able and eager to make once they reach the United Kingdom.

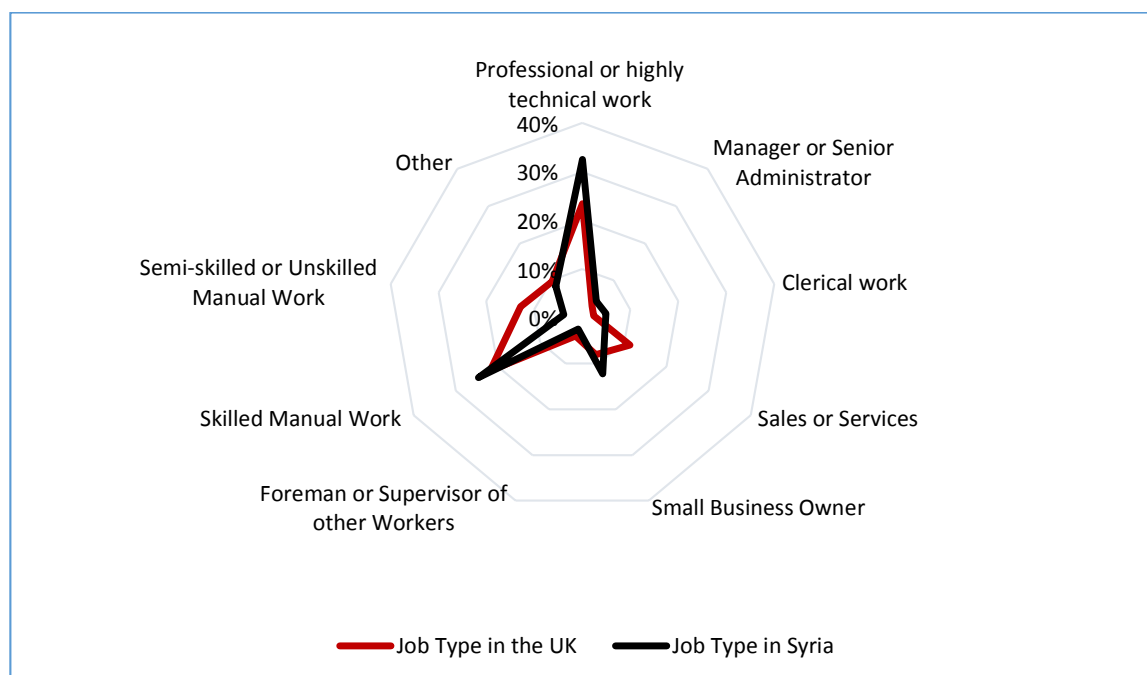
## 2. Young Syrian refugees are active in the UK labour market but face significant barriers in fully utilising their skills and education

We also asked young Syrians about their current employment status in the UK. A substantial proportion are either studying (36%) or in paid employment (26.8%). Of the others, some are homemakers (14.1%), unable to work or not seeking employment (total 3.2%). But a substantial minority are unemployed and looking for work: 19.1% of young refugees in our sample, nearly five times the current general UK unemployment rate (4.1% in January 2018). If we add those who are underemployed (in the sense that they have less work than they would like), the total is 28.5%.



**Figure 5: Current employment status of Syrian refugees in the UK**

Our data also reveals underemployment of Syrian refugees in another sense. Even amongst those Syrian refugees who are employed, there is a tendency for people to be working in jobs which do not make full use of the experience from their previous employment in Syria. *Figure 6* presents a comparison of the type of work our respondents had six months before leaving Syria, compared to their current job in the UK.



**Figure 6: Comparison of past job type in Syria vis a vis current job in the UK**

In some cases, we can see that Syrian refugees have found employment which matches their past experience: for example – and always remembering that these statistics are limited to those who are presently in work in the UK – 80% of Syrians who had been working in sales or services found the same kind of employment here. In other cases, however, a significant proportion have ended up in jobs that tend to require lower skills and qualifications, and less experience. For example:

- Of those who were doing professional or highly technical work six months before leaving Syria, only a little over half (57.1%) have found similar work here: others have taken semi-skilled or unskilled manual work (10.7%), managerial or senior administrative work (7.1%), clerical work (3.6%), or work in sales and services (7.1%).
- Of those who were doing skilled manual work six months before leaving Syria, 60.9% are doing similar work now. Some have shifted to clerical work (4.3%) or have become small business owners (8.7%), but many have ended up in semi-skilled or unskilled manual work (13%) or other types of work not covered by our categories (4.3%).
- Exactly half of those who were foremen or supervisors of other workers six months before leaving Syria are being utilised in similar roles now. The rest are all now in semi-skilled or unskilled manual labour.
- Further analysis by sector indicates other patterns; for example, service sector workers (including the care and health sectors) are tending to work in the same field as before. This is consistent with existing evidence that indicate that refugees with experience of care work are more likely to find employment in this sector.

The overall picture that emerges is that young Syrian refugees are faced with higher levels of unemployment in the UK than citizens, but many of them who are in employment are doing jobs for which they are over-qualified. Our attention then needs to turn to identifying the drivers of this underuse of Syrian refugees' skills and experience.

To understand their employment prospects, we asked young Syrian refugees to report the main factors preventing them from getting a job. Results for the UK are plotted in *Table 1*.

	Named as 1st factor	Named as 2nd factor	Named as 3rd factor	Total
Language	54.4	4.0	3.8	<b>62.2</b>
Lack of work experience in the UK	5.0	12.5	23.8	<b>41.3</b>
Lack of experience in applying for jobs	3.8	15.2	7.9	<b>26.7</b>
Lack of connections/contacts	1.0	5.0	13.3	<b>19.3</b>
Lack of recognition of overseas qualifications	7.4	8.9	2.9	<b>19.2</b>
Lack of computer skills	2.9	10.2	2.9	<b>16.0</b>
Irrelevance of my past education and work	2.4	9.6	3.8	<b>15.0</b>
Lack of training opportunities	4.5	6.6	4.6	<b>15.7</b>
Lack of knowledge/familiarity with labour market	1.9	4.0	7.9	<b>13.8</b>
Lack of references / documentation	.5	3.3	7.1	<b>10.9</b>
Lack of career counselling	2.6	5.6	2.1	<b>10.3</b>
Not knowing how to search for job vacancies	.2	5.0	4.2	<b>9.4</b>
Lack of resources (e.g. expenses, childcare etc.)	1.0	3.0	5.0	<b>9.0</b>
Experience of racism/discrimination	.7	1.7	5.0	<b>7.4</b>
Lack of legal access to employment	1.4	4.0	1.3	<b>6.7</b>
Being a refugee	.2	1.3	3.3	<b>4.8</b>

**Table 1: Factors preventing young Syrian refugees securing a job in the UK (%)**

Young Syrians in the UK perceive language to be the biggest obstacle to labour market participation. More than half in our survey (54.4%) named it as the first factor preventing them from securing a job. In total, 62.2% of valid responses put language as one of the top three barriers they faced, which chimes with findings elsewhere that new refugees need intense and upfront language learning. Long waiting lists, particularly at the entry level of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses, were specifically identified as a pressing issue. Other significant factors included lack of work experience in the UK (41.3%, of whom 5% mentioned it as the most important factor) and lack of experience with applications and interviews (26.7%, and mentioned as the most important factor by 3.8%).

The top entries in *Table 1* point to language training and help with adapting to the UK employment market as the key factors that would address Syrian refugees' perceived barriers. It is worth noting, therefore, that beyond language – which is what one might have expected – many of these impediments are things that are likely to affect UK citizens as well, particularly young people (e.g. lack of experience and familiarity with labour market processes). This suggests that many challenges are not 'refugee-specific', but instead shared by anyone trying to get a foothold in the labour market, and that it might therefore be effective to design policies built on this common ground.

One further factor worth highlighting here – which *does* seem to be refugee-specific – is the problem of how to prove and recognise Syrians' previous qualifications. When asked about their experiences in the UK, only 7.2% mentioned that their past qualifications had been converted or recognised in the UK. Moreover, nearly a third of young Syrians cited 'lack of recognition of overseas qualifications' (19.2%) and lack of references or documentation concerning their qualifications (10.9%) as one of the top three barriers for them. This is a problem most likely to affect the professional and skilled individuals, whose experience is most under-used. It is therefore an obvious priority, even if its elimination is unlikely by itself, to ameliorate all the problems discussed here.

### **Policy recommendation B.**

Investing in the education and training of young refugees, which was forcibly interrupted by the conflict, is paramount. A continued focus on improving English language provisions, eliminating long waiting lists particularly at the entry level of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses, will remove a key barrier to work for Syrian refugees, though on its own will not address unemployment and underemployment.

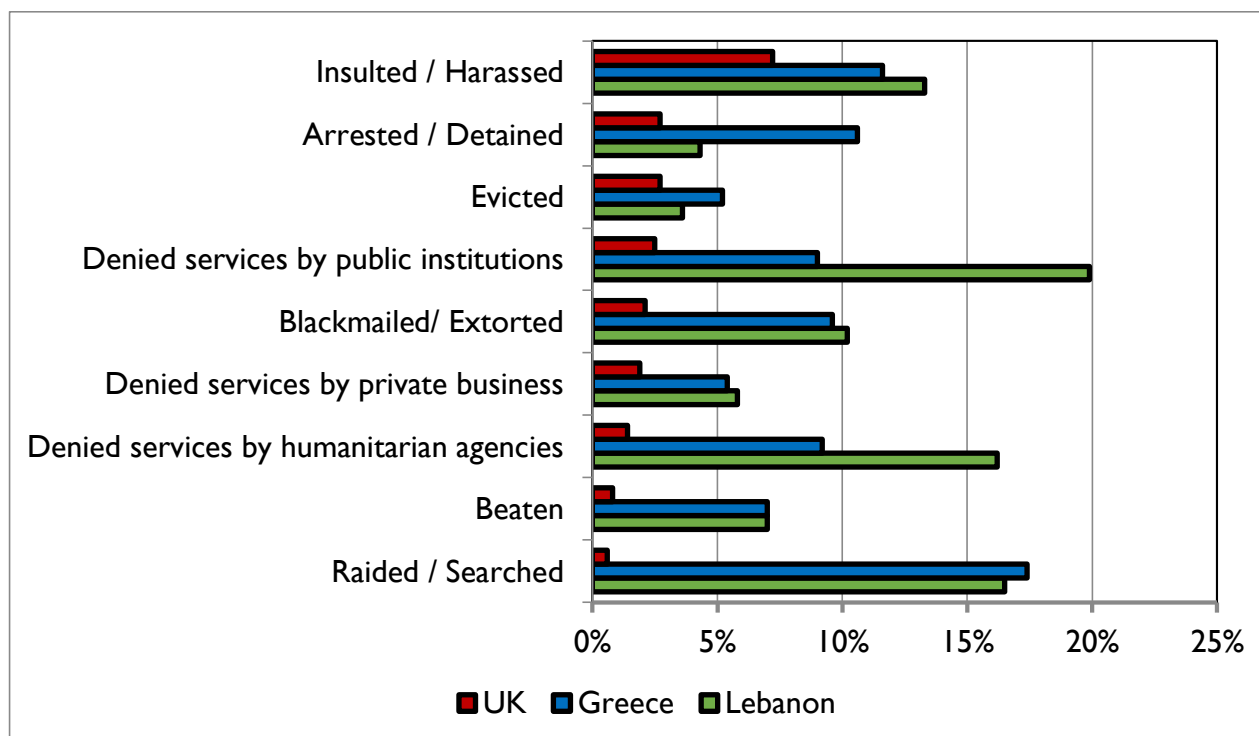
Further priorities should be helping young Syrians to get work experience (e.g. through work placements, apprentices, support with setting up own businesses) and familiarity with the processes of applying for jobs, obstacles to labour market entry that are shared with young British citizens.

Providing alternative accreditation of past qualifications and skills with minimal bureaucracy will help remove a key factor explaining the significant under-utilisation of high skills in the Syrian workforce. A possible model of skills auditing can be found at the 'UK National Recognition Information Service' or the 'European Qualifications Passport for Refugees'.

### 3. The UK provides better support and a less hostile environment than other countries

While refugees everywhere face some hostile attitudes, Syrian refugees in the UK report less overt discrimination than those in Lebanon or Greece. Our study asked young Syrian refugees about their experiences in all three countries. The headline figures suggest that refugee experiences are much less negative in the UK than they are elsewhere.

Figure 7 plots the percent of respondents who reported having suffered each of the following experiences of overt discrimination. While Syrian refugees still suffer from some negative experiences, especially being insulted and harassed (7.2%), the overall numbers of structural discrimination by business or state/NGO institutions, and of physical violence and oppression are low, and considerably lower than the corresponding figures for Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Greece.

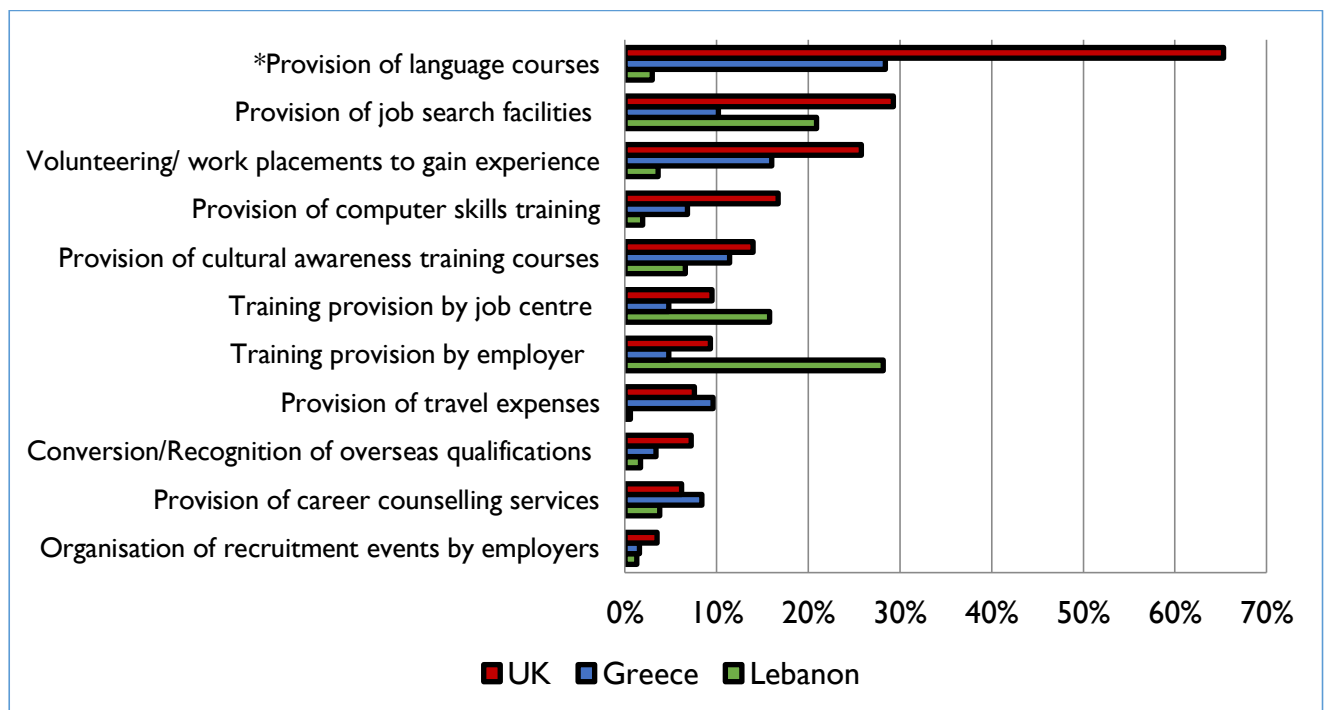


**Figure 7: Negative experiences of young Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Greece and the UK**

Moreover, Syrian refugees in the UK are more likely to have benefited from key provisions since their arrival, compared to those in Lebanon and Greece. As Figure 8 shows, there are national differences in the ways that refugees have been supported, including the balance of support between government bodies and employers. But, overall, the figures for the UK tend to be either somewhat or significantly more positive than in either of the other two study countries.

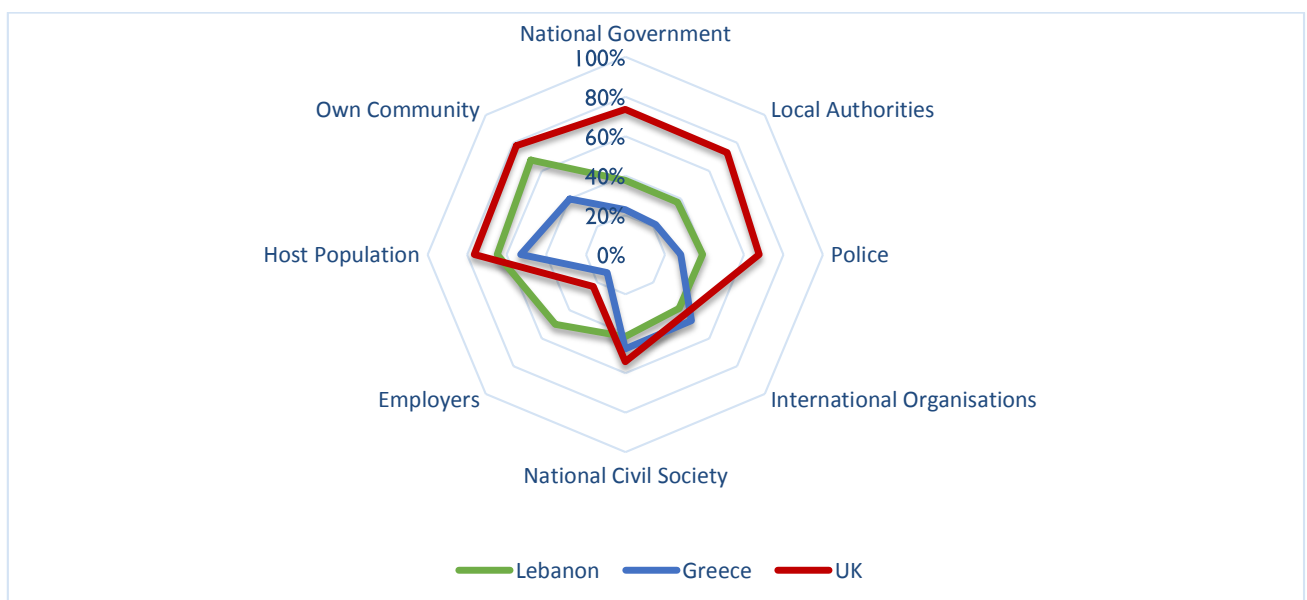
Nevertheless, there are some points of concern. For one thing, these overall figures indicate significant gaps, which relate directly to the barriers to labour market access, discussed earlier. First of all, given the importance of language training in overcoming barriers to employment, it is regrettable that 34.7% of Syrian refugees in the UK did not access English language courses, with women in particular being less likely to have benefitted. Of grave concern is also the very low percentage of young Syrians, 7.2% in the UK, who have received support in having their overseas qualifications recognised. This provides further impetus for the need to implement flexible and efficient schemes for auditing and accrediting the skills and qualifications of refugees, as noted above.

In addition, there is scope for enhancing provisions in relation to other key barriers. Increasing the proportion of refugees taking part in volunteering or work placements in the UK (currently 25.8%), could help alleviate the second biggest barrier to the labour market. Our results indicate that there is further scope for provisions that empower refugees to realise their employment aspirations. The key priorities here concern the low proportion of refugees that have experienced training provision by job centres (9.5%), career counselling (6.2%) or employer-led recruitment events (3.5%). Young Syrian refugees in the UK are also about three times less likely to benefit from training provision by employers, compared to those in Lebanon. Any initiative, from the private or public sector, that helps refugees familiarise themselves with and navigate through the UK labour market would significantly enhance their employment prospects and increase their confidence with application and interview processes.



**Figure 8: Provisions young Syrians have benefited from in Lebanon, Greece and the UK**

Young Syrians in the UK are also more likely to positively evaluate the key actors and institutions they encountered since their forced displacement, compared to those in Lebanon or Greece.

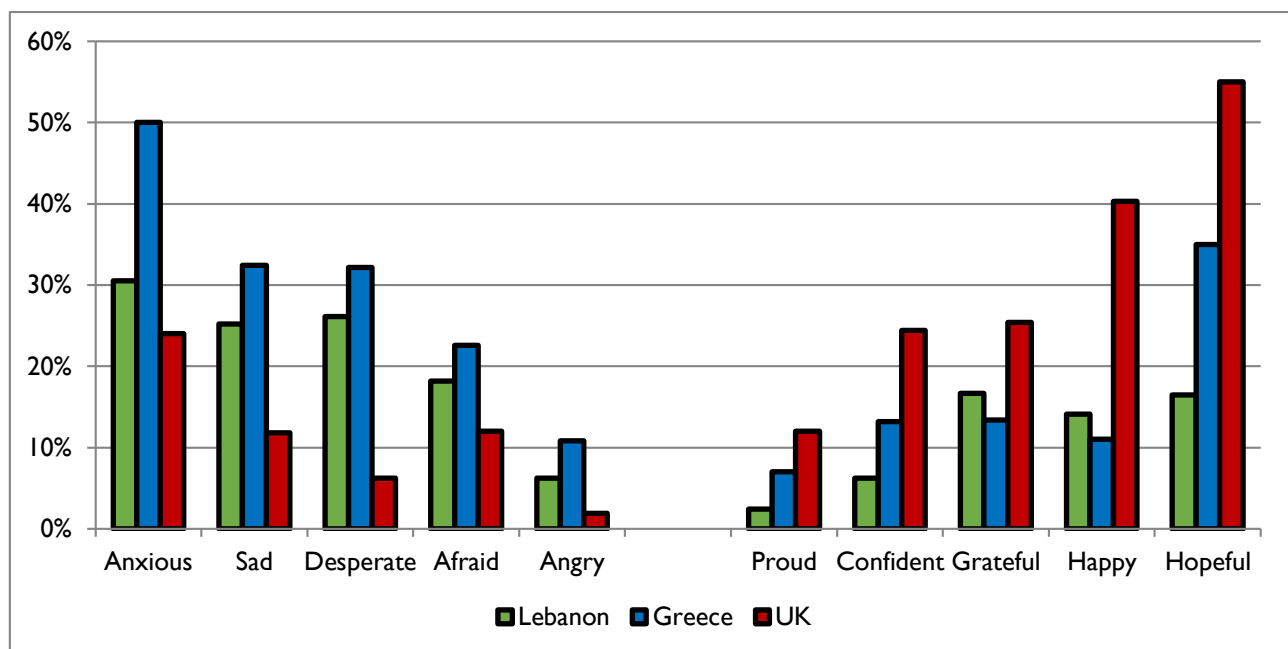


**Figure 9: Positive Evaluations of key actors in Lebanon, Greece and the UK**



Figure 9 shows the percentages reporting positive evaluations for a range of key actors in each country. Those in the UK are more positive, in particular, about the role of national government and local authorities. In part, this reflects the more prominent role played by public authorities in the UK, by contrast with Greece and Lebanon; but it also suggests that this role is often played successfully. One actor more positively evaluated in Lebanon, compared to the UK, is employers, who, as noted, play a more active role in providing training provisions, and in some cases other support (e.g. housing), to refugees there.

Finally, we asked survey participants to select up to four emotions -from a list of ten- that best capture their feelings about their current situation in each of the three host countries studied. Results are plotted in Figure 10 and are consistent with earlier findings. While Syrian refugees in the UK mostly feel hopeful (55%), happy (40.3%) and grateful (25.4%), those in Lebanon and Greece experience much more anxiety, sadness, desperation and fear.



**Figure 10: Emotions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Greece and the UK**

### **Policy recommendation C.**

While we shouldn't be complacent, it is worth publicising good news about the experience of Syrian refugees in the UK, which is more positive than for those in Lebanon and Greece.

Still, only a small minority of Syrians in the UK have received support in key areas of labour market access. There is a need for authorities at all levels to concentrate time and resources to encourage, facilitate and coordinate the provision of these services, particularly in relation to improving refugees' understanding of how the labour market and job application process work in the UK.

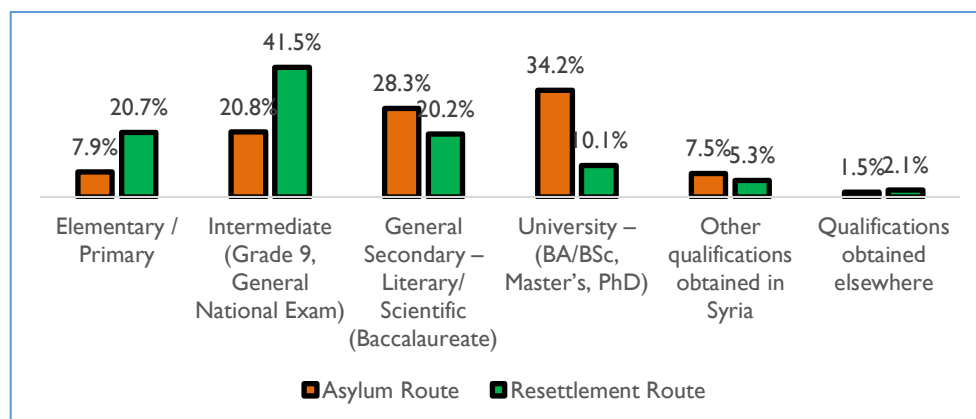
The private sector should engage with the Syrian refugee population as a potential workforce, recognising and utilising their skills.

#### 4. Resettled Syrian refugees are better supported than those coming through the asylum system

So far, we have been dealing with aggregated figures for all Syrian refugees in the UK. Our data also allows us to compare the experiences of young refugees based on their mode of entry to the UK. The two ‘types’ of Syrian refugees who arrive in the UK are those who are resettled (*Resettlement Route – RR*) and those who find their own way to Britain and apply for asylum (*Asylum Route – AR*). In our sample, 39% (189 respondents) had been granted refugee status through the resettlement route, and 42% (202 respondents) through the asylum route.

The former apply via the United Nations Refugee Agency from neighbouring countries such as Lebanon, to which they have fled from Syria. In 2015, the UK Government, after significant public pressure, agreed to resettle 20,000 by 2020, as part of the Syrian Vulnerable Person’s Resettlement Scheme (VPRS), a scheme targeting the most vulnerable of Syrian forced migrants. Local authorities take the lead on resettling specific individuals and groups, who are then supported by the aid budget for the first year through Council-Home Office agreements that provides specific resources for each resettled person. On the other hand, those who arrive by their own means to the UK must apply for asylum and traverse the asylum process, meaning that they are subject to no choice dispersal around the UK and are housed and supported by the Home Office while in the asylum process. On being recognised as refugees, there are no dedicated statutory resources available to aid their settlement.<sup>14</sup>

In the year ending March 2018, the number of applications from Syrian nationals fell 42% compared with the previous year (from 1,074 to 619), a fall consistent with the previous two years. Over the same period, there was a fall in both the number of Syrian nationals granted asylum (down 54%) and a 20% decrease in the number of Syrian nationals being granted protection in the UK through other means, such as the VPRS (from 5,453 to 4,342).<sup>15</sup>



**Figure 11: Educational qualifications among Asylum and Resettlement route refugees**

While we have already discussed the sorting of refugees between our three study countries on the basis of skills and qualifications, a similar effect also exists between these two modes of entry. To begin

<sup>14</sup> See National Audit Office (2016) *The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement*. Accessed 12 July 2018. <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/The-Syrian-Vulnerable-Persons-Resettlement-programme.pdf>. It should be noted that prior to 2011, the UK Government had funded dedicated casework support to newly-recognised refugees in the UK to assist in their integration through the Refugee Integration and Employment Service. Since 2011, all newly-recognised refugees in Scotland continue to be offered integration advice and support by the Scottish Refugee Council. See: Mulvey, G. (2015). Refugee integration policy: the effects of UK policy-making on refugees in Scotland. *Journal of Social Policy*, 44(2), 357-375; Strang, A., Baillot, H., and Mignard, E.. (2016) *Rights, Resilience & Refugee Integration in Scotland: New Scots and the Holistic Integration Service*. Scottish Refugee Council.

<sup>15</sup> See Gov.UK (2018) ‘National Statistics: How many people do we grant asylum or protection to?’. Published 24 May 2018. Accessed 12 July 2018. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-year-ending-march-2018/how-many-people-do-we-grant-asylum-or-protection-to>.

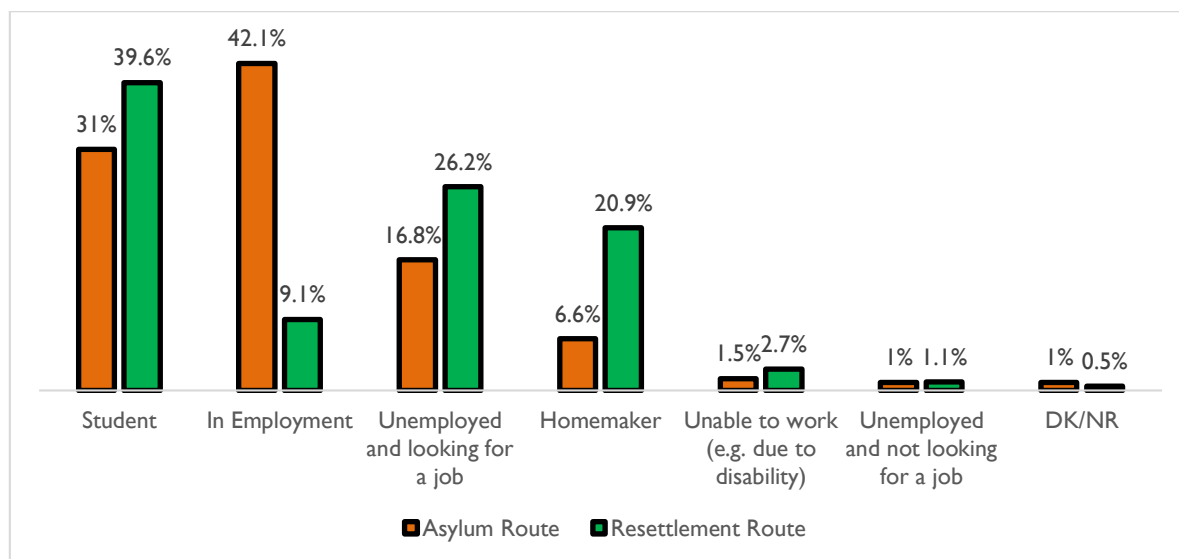
with there are differences in the ‘attributes’ that Syrians have. As *Figure 11* shows, the mode of access to the UK has educational dimensions, with AR refugees much more likely to have higher education qualifications compared to RR refugees, 34% against 10%.

This is also reflected in employment biographies. In the six months prior to leaving Syria, significantly more AR refugees were in some form of salaried employment, 52% compared to a figure of 36% for RR refugees. While some of this variation can be explained by the high number of ‘homemakers’ among RR refugees, 21% against 6% for AR refugees, this is only a partial explanation, with other factors also playing a role. The most important of these is the link between the educational levels of participants and the UK Government making a specific point of resettling more vulnerable Syrians. There is a likely symbiosis between vulnerability, trauma and worklessness.

Looking ahead, re-integration into the education system, as noted, is one of the main aspirations of many young Syrians, with one out of three stating that they wished to be able to study in the UK (31%). A major challenge towards this direction, however, seems to be the lack of formal documentation, particularly among AR refugees (61%), compared to RR refugees (31%). Mode of access therefore also impacts upon educational prospects.

Furthermore, for RR refugees, access to the labour market is, in principle, open from the minute they arrive in the UK, though significant barriers to such access remain. By contrast, those who follow the asylum route have, in practice, no access to the labour market while waiting for decisions on their applications, and are left to fend for themselves once they are granted protection.

Still, 42% of AR refugees were in some form of employment when they completed our survey, compared to just 9% among RR refugees (see *Figure 12*).



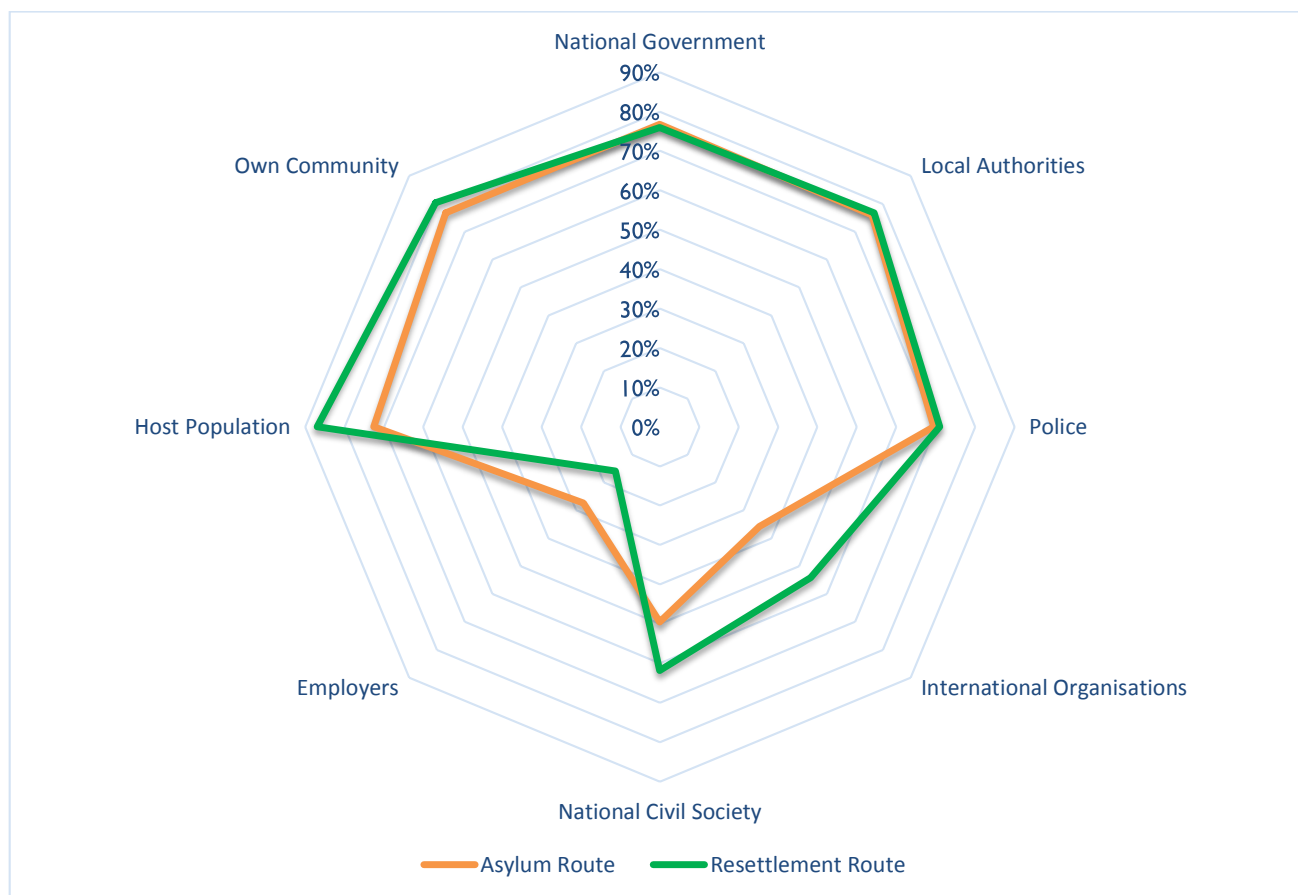
**Figure 12: Employment status among Asylum and Resettlement route refugees**

While this may seem paradoxical, it is possible that this is explained by the extra time afforded to RR refugees to learn English and attend educational courses without the immediate need to generate their own income. Such support is not equally available to AR refugees, who have generally had less access to English language provision or education. An additional explanation may be the higher skill levels of AR refugees, alongside the ‘vulnerability’ of RR refugees. Taken together it should not be surprising that RR refugees are further away from labour market participation.

Moreover, the positive and negative experiences differ between the two groups. RR refugees were more likely to have benefited from two of the social welfare provisions we have identified as being key to overcoming barriers to employment: provision of English language courses (84% of RR refugees but

62% of AR refugees had benefited from these), and provision of cultural awareness training courses (24% of RR refugees and 10% of AR refugees). It is also worth adding that language provision is built into resettlement funding, so even the 84% appears low.

Turning to the role of key actors, RR refugees have been exposed to more multi-agency support than those coming through the asylum route and are predictably more positive about the support they have received from them. RR refugees speak more positively of Local Authorities; International Organisations; and National Civil Society/NGOs. Interesting though, they also speak more positively of the British population, suggesting perhaps that minus the hostile anti-asylum environment and a need to prove their 'legitimacy' as refugees, Syrians are able to live relatively free of overt hostility. By contrast, AR refugees have more positive evaluations of employers only (see *Figure 13*).



**Figure 13: Positive evaluations of key actors among Asylum and Resettlement route refugees**

RR refugees also have a more positive overall outlook on social cohesion and relations compared to entrants through the asylum route: they were consistently more eager to respond 'not at all' when asked about the extent to which factors caused divisions between Syrians and UK citizens (e.g. availability of employment opportunities, education, training, or resources; cultural differences; historical animosity; and religious differences).

This all suggests that there is a more supportive environment for RR refugees than for those who have gone through the asylum system. Taking this a step further, it also seems that there is a more general sense that there is less tension for RR refugees, perhaps due to the fact that, unlike AR refugees, they do not have to prove who they are and why they are here.

All of these findings can be encapsulated in two more general findings that, at least in part, emanate from the help and support that RR refugees receive in comparison with AR refugees. RR respondents are happier, more confident, and more hopeful than those coming through the asylum route despite, for example, higher levels of employment among the latter and the UK Government supposedly taking the more vulnerable among the former.

Perhaps of even more significance is the young refugees' reported future plans. While 70% of Syrian refugees who come through the asylum route plan to remain in the UK, the figure for those resettled is 83%. This is at the very least indicative of what may seem like an obvious point, that where people feel treated well and are supported, they will tend to settle better.

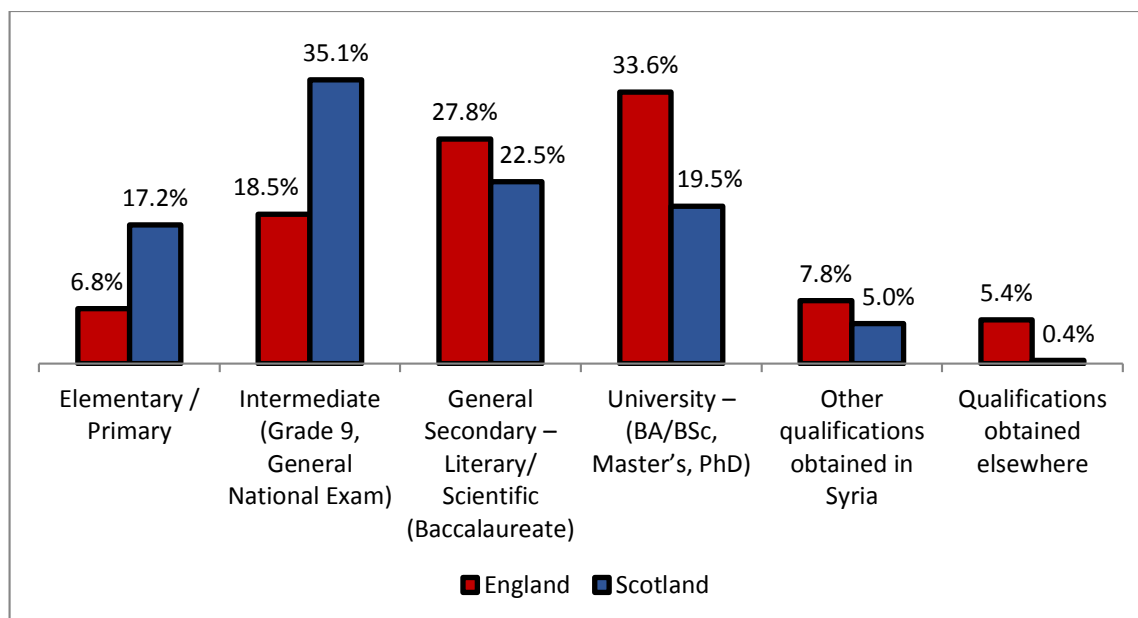
#### **Policy recommendation D.**

Having access to social provision and no need to prove their right to be in the country has a positive impact on how refugees experience their lives. This suggests the need for policy to provide more social goods, taking more seriously universal provision, and overcoming the 'culture of disbelief' with regard to the asylum process.

The existing two-tier refugee system produces inequalities in the experience and support available to young Syrians, based on their mode of entry to the UK. All refugees should have the same social provisions to support their integration, and this should be modelled on the refugee resettlement model.

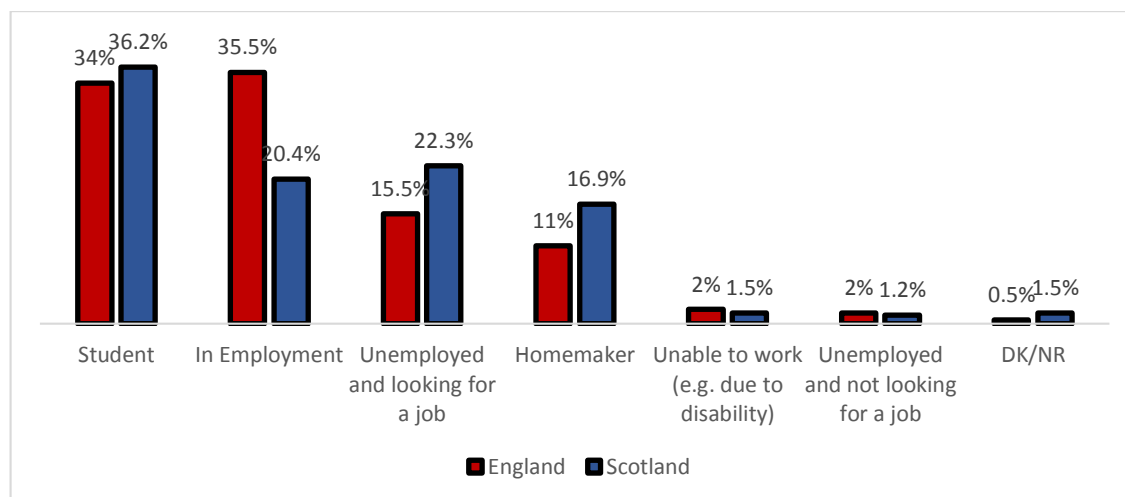
## 5. Refugees in Scotland settle better than those in England

Beyond differences in terms of the mode of entry to the UK, we also find some significant differences between refugees in Scotland and those in England. In our sample, 44% (212 respondents) of young Syrian refugees have settled in England and 55% (265 respondents) have settled in Scotland. To begin with, we observe differences in the levels of skills of young Syrian refugees in England compared to those in Scotland (see *Figure 14*). While the latter are more likely than the former to only have completed intermediary education (18.5% in England against 35.1% in Scotland), more than a third of those in England have a Higher Education degree.



**Figure 14: Educational Qualifications of young Syrians in England and Scotland**

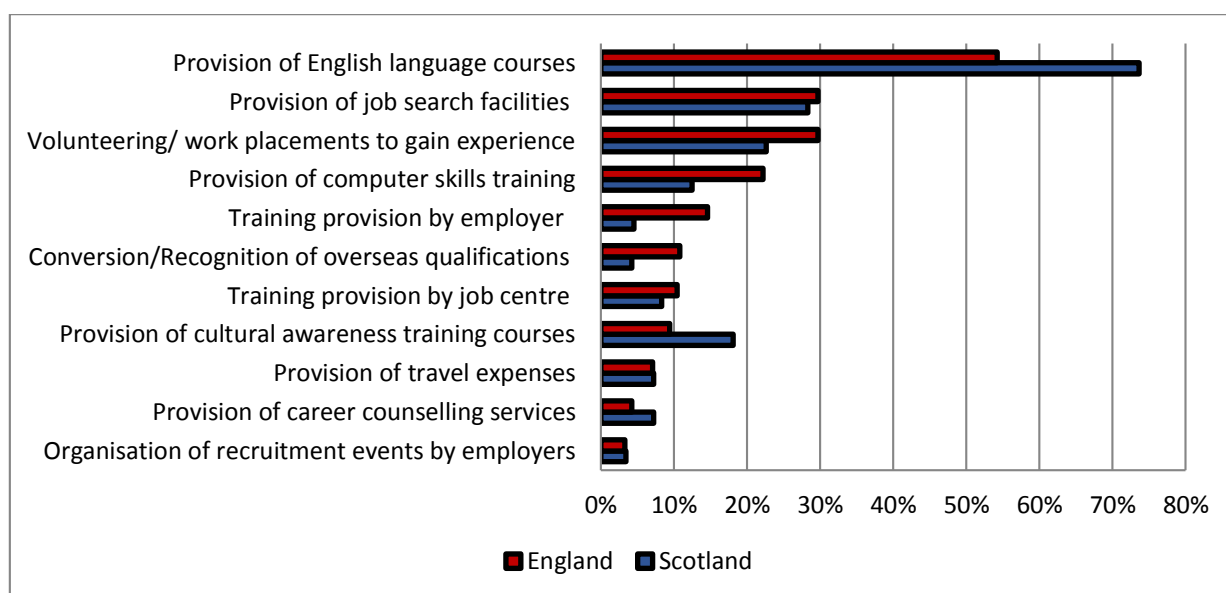
Moreover, young Syrian refugees in England are slightly more likely to have documentation that shows their qualifications. In both countries, those who came through the asylum route are more likely to have such documentation. However, the largest differences are observed in the resettled population. In Scotland, 77% of RR refugees possess no documentation about their qualifications, compared to 49% in England. This suggests that young Syrian refugees in Scotland may be further away from re-integration into the education system and the labour market compared to those in England. Indeed, as shown in *Figure 15*, refugees in Scotland are less likely to be in employment than those in England (20.4% against 35.5%). This may partly do with the higher numbers of RR refugees in our Scottish sample who, as discussed in the previous section, demonstrate lower levels of labour market participation.



**Figure 15: Employment Status of young Syrians in England and Scotland**



Our data also reveals that language is perceived by young Syrians as the main obstacle in meeting their future employment aspirations, more so in Scotland than in England (67% against 56%). Yet, at the same time, as *Figure 16* plots, refugees in Scotland report higher levels of access to English language provision than those in England (74% against 54%), among both RR and AR refugees. Therefore, the fact that those in Scotland are less likely to be in work should arguably not be viewed as a permanent state. Those being facilitated to pursue education as well as with greater access to language support in Scotland may well be in the position in the near future to access employment opportunities that better match their skills, qualifications and experiences. To this end, it is also important to be further supported with relevant provisions that address the other main barriers that refugees face in getting a foothold in the labour market, previously shown in *Table 1*.



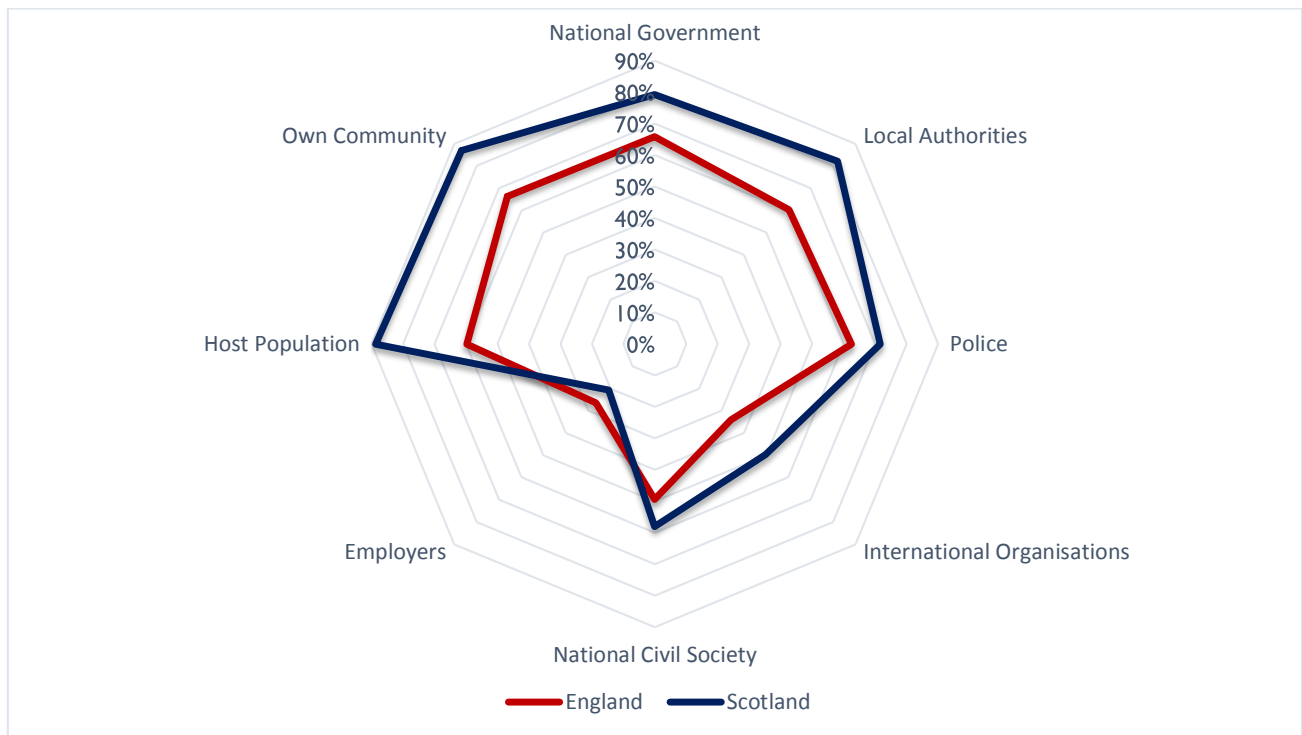
**Figure 16: Provisions young Syrians have benefited from in England and Scotland**

In all, young Syrians who have settled in Scotland are much better supported compared to those in England. 72% of our respondents in Scotland reported that their accommodation rent is subsidised by the state, compared to only 46% of those in England. Along the same lines, state cash subsidies constituted the main source of income for 70% of young Syrians in Scotland, compared to 47% of those in England. Taken together, these result in far better living conditions for those in Scotland, with, for example, only 11% living in shared accommodation, compared to 28% in England. Less state support to young Syrian refugees in England pushes them to faster labour market integration than those in Scotland, as self-reliance is adopted as a survival mechanism. Yet, this not only exposes them to more precarious employment conditions, as discussed, but also impacts upon their emotional state.

Young Syrians in England are more confident than those in Scotland (32% compared to 19%) but also more anxious (27% compared to 22%) and scared (14% compared to 9%) about their life in the UK. Moreover, young Syrians appear to be much happier in Scotland than in England (49% against 30%). These emotions feed directly into young Syrians' plans for their future in the UK, with 81% of those in Scotland intending to remain in the country, compared to 65% of those in England.

Finally, turning to the role of key actors, the more positive experiences among those in Scotland with a number of actors is also testament to a greater sense of social support (see *Figure 17*). In our sample in Scotland, 79% of refugees positively evaluated the national government, compared to 66% in England, although what constitutes the national in the Scottish case is not necessarily clear. Looking at another tier of government produces an even starker outcome, with 82% in Scotland and 60% in England providing a positive evaluation of Local Authorities. Indeed, a full range of actors are viewed more positively in Scotland than in England, civil society organisations (58% against 49%), the Syrian

community (87% against 66%) and international organisations (50% against 34%). However, what is perhaps most striking in these results, is the evaluation of the general population. In England, 60% of Syrian refugees rate the population positively, compared to 89% for those who have settled in Scotland.



**Figure 17: Positive evaluations of key actors in England and Scotland**

A plausible explanation for this difference may be found in contextual factors, with the existence of a national policy of refugee integration in Scotland but not currently in England, and the overall less anti-immigration narrative in Scotland, especially in terms of political leadership and the media, impacting on how refugees perceive the general population, and vice versa.<sup>16</sup>

### **Policy recommendation E.**

Young Syrian refugees in Scotland are better supported, and more positive about their engagement with people and institutions, although they are currently more distanced from re-integration into the labour market compared to those settled in England.

If the aim of refugee policy is to facilitate settlement, rather than forced self-reliance, then the support offered to refugees in Scotland should be emulated across the UK, to confront the inequalities of the current system. Alternatively, providing the Scottish Parliament with greater jurisdiction concerning the welfare and settlement of those forcibly displaced would bring clear benefits for those settled in Scotland.

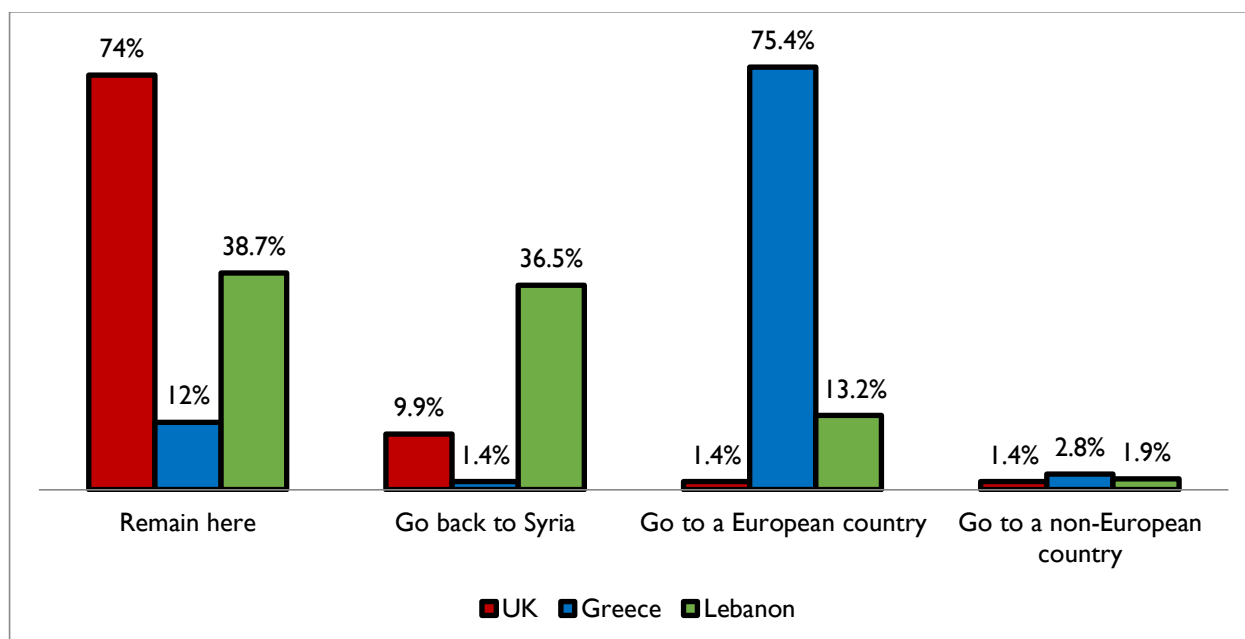
<sup>16</sup> Whilst as far we are aware, this is the best data available for comparing the experience of refugees in England and Scotland, findings from such fine grained comparison should be interpreted with caution. A priori interregional heterogeneity in the experiences of refugees is likely to be substantial, given differences in economic and social contexts and the distribution of refugee and migrant populations. This view is reinforced by our findings. Therefore, it is important that future research addresses these issues in more detail by carrying out further analyses that are explicitly designed to understand regional heterogeneity, both between the home nations and also within England, which is internally diverse.

## Conclusion: Building common ground

Findings from the face to face interviews with young Syrian refugees paint an overall positive picture about their reception and settlement in the United Kingdom, compared to others who have found refuge in Lebanon or Greece. Forcibly displaced young Syrians in the UK receive better support, suffer less overt discrimination and seem to settle better than those, with a similar demographic background, in other countries. In interpreting these results, it should be taken into account that the worse economic conditions, weaker political structures and significantly higher numbers of forcibly displaced people in Lebanon and Greece pose many additional and disproportionate challenges to the authorities there. Overall though, the British government, and all key stakeholders at various levels, should be commended for implementing measures, many of which are closely aligned with the reported needs and aspirations of young Syrian refugees.

Still, the analysis here has identified areas in the current practice in the UK where there is scope, and, indeed, urgent need for policy improvements. Our recommendations in this report are designed to facilitate better training and skills provision for young refugees, which would enhance their prospects of not only accessing the labour market and overcoming existing obstacles, but also of doing so in line with their own aspirations, skills and qualifications. This is also important for social integration.

Our research also draws some broader conclusions. Comparisons both across the three countries studied and between sub-groups of forcibly displaced Syrians in the UK, reveal an obvious but crucial point: refugees that are supported better, settle better in the host state. At the cross-national level, this is reflected in their reported emotions about their current situation, but also in the ways they imagine and build their futures. Three out of four young Syrians intend to remain in the UK, compared to just 12% for those in Greece and 39% for those in Lebanon (*Figure 18*). The aim of most young Syrians in Greece at the time of the survey was to reach another European country (75%), Germany in particular, an option that now appears unlikely after the EU-Turkey deal and the closure of the central European route. Far fewer have a similar ambition among those who are in Lebanon (13%), with the limited support and more adverse conditions there leading over a third (37%) to express a preference for returning to Syria, despite the ongoing conflict.



**Figure 18: Future intentions of young Syrians in Lebanon, Greece and the UK**

The same pattern is observed within sub-groups in the UK. One of the most striking findings is the difference in the levels of support offered to refugees based on their mode of entry to the UK, through the asylum or resettlement route, as well as on their location, in England or Scotland. For one, this seems to have a direct impact on future intentions. Resettled refugees are more like to see their future in the UK compared to those that applied for asylum upon arrival (83% and 70% respectively). Refugees in Scotland are more likely to want to remain there compared to those in England (81% vis a vis 65%). Practices that empower and support refugees are therefore paramount, if the intention of policy is settlement and integration.

What's more, the current system produces inequalities which are legally questionable and morally unsustainable. The UK is signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, which commits its parties to granting international protection to persons with well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. A system that creates multiple and arbitrary tiers of support not only undermines its effectiveness but also potentially clashes with the country's international legal obligations. This disjuncture is greater in England compared to Scotland and for those coming through the asylum route compared to refugees resettled through the VPRS.

On a more pragmatic note, if the goal is to foster social cohesion, alleviate social tensions and generate more public acceptance of refugees in the British society, our findings can help policy-makers in the UK to frame and advocate policies which highlight refugees' deservingness and vulnerability, their economic contributions to their host society, as well as the considerable common ground that they share with UK citizens concerning both needs and underlying ethical perspectives.

The citizens' perspectives, drawing on representative surveys of the host populations in Lebanon, Greece and the UK, are the focus of our second, forthcoming report. Synthesising evidence from the refugees and citizens surveys offers the exciting opportunity to steer public discourse in a way that promotes social cohesion and welfare for both groups. As discussed here, many of the obstacles to labour market participation faced by refugees are shared with citizens. Findings also dispel many of the persistent myths among British citizens about why refugees flee their country and what contributions they are able and eager to make in the UK. Indeed, our evidence from the citizens survey suggest that British people have a strong preference for highly skilled migrants and this preference is broadly met by the characteristics of Syrian refugees in the UK, as discussed here. Similarly, we find that there is common ground between Syrian refugees and UK citizens concerning what matters for a good life, which counters myths about 'incompatible values' between the two populations. A central challenge is to communicate this alignment, a key focus of our next report. Refugees' training and skills needs can and should be met, and met in a more supportive social context. And members of host populations can be reassured that the principles governing the distribution of scarce resources are ones which resonate with underlying preferences, needs and ethical perspectives that both groups share.

## Messages from young Syrian refugees to British citizens

*As part of our fieldwork, we asked young Syrian refugees in the UK to send a message to British citizens, which best captures how they would like to be seen and treated in the UK. These are some of the things they told us:*

- ◆ "Tolerance and acceptance of the 'Other' needs courage and compassion, two traits British citizens have often shown. Therefore, please give Syrians the helping hand in their time of need."
- ◆ "I could be a valuable member of society if I was given the chance."
- ◆ "Thank you for accepting us into the British society. I hope I can add a positive touch to this country."
- ◆ "We are here because we couldn't tolerate the situation in Syria anymore. Please help us to build a decent and peaceful life."
- ◆ "Help me find a job. I have two masters with distinction, I am a previous champion in swimming, I won one of the most competitive scholarship in the world, and I am a community developer and a public speaker. It is shameful not to be able to find a job".
- ◆ "I would like to thank you for being so helpful towards the Syrian refugees."
- ◆ "We came here to work not to take your money. We just want to have a decent life."
- ◆ "I am a human just like you, treat me with respect and give me the opportunity to rebuild my life."
- ◆ "Try to know more about us and about our country because we are not what you think we are."
- ◆ "We lost our chance to continue our education back home. We lost everything so please help us to start over."
- ◆ "I'd only like to thank the British people for their kindness. There is nothing else to say."
- ◆ "I just want to ask the British people not to misjudge us because of what they hear on the media."
- ◆ "Put yourself in our shoes."
- ◆ "Please treat me as one of you and not as someone who came here just to deprive you of your rights."
- ◆ "I would like to thank you and tell you that I appreciate all your help and what you grant us as refugees."
- ◆ "We came here with our own aspirations. We have the skills/ education needed to start a new life and to help further improve this country so we are just asking you to have faith in us, in our abilities, and good intentions."
- ◆ "Give us a chance to show you our skills and to prove that we deserve a chance to start a decent, peaceful life."
- ◆ "There is nothing to say as I know my words will not be heard by anyone."



**#RefugeePolitics**



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