

Preventing skilled contributions: how young refugees are locked out of apprenticeships

Policy Brief

January 2026

Context

For young refugees whose educational journeys have been severely disrupted by having to flee conflict or war, apprenticeships have the potential to provide a secure, debt-free bridge directly into the UK workforce. Many young refugees possess extraordinary resilience and multilingual skills, and apprenticeships (recently formalised as the 'gold-standard' for technical training in the Post 16 Education and Skills White Paper) can enable them to access high-demand and skills shortage sectors. At the same time, this route to meaningful employment encourages and facilitates the economic independence necessary for young refugees to thrive, integrate and contribute to their new communities.

In recognition of this, forcibly displaced people on Ukrainian and Afghan resettlement schemes, and with refugee status are explicitly listed as eligible to undertake funded apprenticeships.



The problem:

Nonetheless, talented refugee learners risk being locked out of apprenticeships.

The majority of refugees have leave to remain in the UK that must be renewed after periods of time ranging from 18 months (many Ukrainian refugees) to 5 years (those with Refugee Status). At present, to access apprenticeship funds, the apprenticeship provider must ensure that the individual proposing to undertake the apprenticeship:

“ ”

“Is able to complete the apprenticeship within the time they have available, including the end-point assessment”

And critically,

“ ”

“If the provider knows an individual is unable to complete the apprenticeship in the time they have available, **(e.g. because their visa will expire or because they have a fixed term contract which is shorter than the duration of the apprenticeship), they must not be funded.**”

All apprenticeships in England, Scotland, and Wales must have a minimum duration of 8 months, however the average length is much longer than this. This rule applies regardless of the level - however, the length of the apprenticeship increases as the qualification level gets higher and more complex:

Apprenticeship Level	UK Equivalent Qualification	Typical Duration
Level 2 (Intermediate)	GCSE (equivalent)	12 to 18 months
Level 3 (Advanced)	A-Level (equivalent)	18 to 24 months
Level 4 & 5 (Higher)	Foundation Degree (equivalent)	3 to 4 years
Level 6 & 7 (Degree)	Bachelor's or Master's Degree	4 to 6 years



Ukrainians arriving in the UK under the Homes for Ukraine Scheme, and now part way through the subsequent 18 month and 24 month extensions, are completely excluded from all apprenticeships at Level 4 or above. Lower levels may still be restricted depending on how far along the learner is in their visa before applying for apprenticeships.



Refugees with the full grant of 5 years Refugee Status will be excluded from apprenticeships at different stages, depending on when their status was awarded, and what level of apprenticeship they are aiming to do. For example - a refugee with one year left on their status papers who is fully eligible to apply for Indefinite Leave to Remain when that expires, will not be able to undertake an apprenticeship.



In addition, those still waiting for their asylum claim to be decided are explicitly ineligible to receive funding for apprenticeships, even if they have been awarded the right to work. Asylum seekers are not normally allowed to work whilst their claim is being decided, and permission to work can only be applied for if 12 months have passed since they lodged their initial asylum application and they are still awaiting a decision from the Home Office (i.e. the delay is not their fault). If permission to work is granted, the asylum seeker is not free to take any job - authorization is restricted to jobs that appear on the Immigration Salary List - nonetheless, they will not be allowed to complete an apprenticeship to this end.

Why this matters

This government has made it a priority to get young people working - through the Get Britain Working White Paper, the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper, and the recently announced Youth Guarantee. Additionally, the government's recently announced proposals to the asylum system and settlement show a clear commitment to incentivise refugees to be economically active through the 'Work and Study' protection route.

At the same time, these exclusions mean that talented, resourceful young people who want to grow, develop and contribute to life in the UK are prevented from doing so - and often in the precise areas of skills shortages or critical economy-boosting fields that many apprenticeships are designed to fill.

Case studies

Sofia* is a young Ukrainian woman who arrived in the UK under the Homes for Ukraine scheme, and found a job as a receptionist in a dental clinic. She wanted to progress her career by becoming a dental nurse. After researching different options, she found that an apprenticeship would be the best route for her. However, she was declined due to the length of her visa. The apprenticeship was 18 months, but Sofia had less than 18 months remaining on her visa. Despite being eligible for an 18-month extension under the Ukrainian Extension Scheme, the apprenticeship funding rules meant that Sofia could not access this opportunity.

Abdi* is a young man from Eritrea and came to the UK as an Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Child. Following a successful asylum claim, he was granted refugee status with five years leave to remain. Abdi thrived in education and was making positive steps towards his dream of becoming a doctor. When the government's pilot Medical Doctor Degree Apprenticeship was announced, Abdi knew this was a great opportunity for him. Abdi progressed in his application, but was ultimately turned down as his refugee status would expire mid-course. Abdi would have been eligible to apply for indefinite leave to remain at the end of his five years leave to remain, but the funding rules meant he could not access this opportunity.

Jayv* is from Uganda and has refugee status with leave to remain. She has several qualifications, including Prince2, as well as a rich professional background. Since she arrived in the UK she has been working in Early Years and Social Care, but she is keen to find a pathway into her preferred career of project management. She began applying for apprenticeships as she believes this is the most effective way to develop her career and skillset, by earning and learning at the same time. However, she was told by hiring managers that she hadn't spent enough time in the country to be eligible. Jayv is now aware of the exemption to the 3 year residency criteria for refugees, but despite this, she faces another challenge. Her current status expires in 2026, so she must wait until she is granted indefinite leave to remain before pursuing apprenticeship opportunities further.

**(names are pseudonyms)*

Recommendations

To create a context where all young people can build more hopeful futures and contribute to communities through apprenticeships:



Apprenticeships funding should mirror Adult Skills Funding rules.

These rules state: “Providers must not fund learners who would not have enough time on their visa to complete their course and who do not intend to, or would not be eligible to, renew their visa. **Where a course continues past a learner’s visa expiry date, providers may at their discretion fund that learner only where they have a high degree of confidence that a learner intends to (and will be eligible to) renew their visa.**” The addition of the discretionary provision would enable providers to include refugees eligible for and intending to renew their visas in apprenticeship cohorts.



Asylum seekers with the right to work should be included in apprenticeship eligibility.



Apprenticeship funding rules should be re-considered as the Government’s changes to asylum and settlement routes evolve to strengthen entitlements and ensure that refugees are not locked out of apprenticeship opportunities and can access meaningful work and learning opportunities

Apprenticeships as a lifeline

“When I first looked into apprenticeships, I was told I couldn’t apply because I hadn’t lived in the UK for three years. Later, I discovered that this rule doesn’t apply to refugees, but very few people, even at job centres, know this. **Clearer guidance and wider access** could help so many refugees get started in meaningful careers.

Apprenticeships can transform lives, I’m living proof of that. Being an apprentice gave me **structure, confidence**, and the **chance to prove my skills** in a new country. Apprenticeships aren’t just training; they’re **lifelines** that help refugees rebuild their professional identities and futures.”

Urwa Mehmood, Digital Marketing Apprentice

Acknowledgements

This briefing was written by Refugee Education UK in collaboration with Routes. Endorsements have been made by Experts by Experience Employment Initiative and Refugee Council. With special thanks to Urwa Mehmood.



References and further reading

Post 16 Education and Skills White Paper

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68f518ee06e6515f7914c7ce/Post-16_Education_and_Skills_white_paper_Accessible_Version.pdf

Get Britain Working White Paper <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/get-britain-working-white-paper/get-britain-working-white-paper>

Adult Skills Funding Rules <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adult-skills-fund-funding-rules/adult-skills-fund-funding-rules-2025-to-2026>

Growth and Skills Levy <https://find-employer-schemes.education.gov.uk/interim/growth-and-skills-levy>

Refugee Education UK (REUK) is a UK charity working towards a world where all young refugees can access education, thrive in education, and use that education to create a hopeful, brighter future. Our direct programme work supports children and young people to get into school, from primary to university, and to thrive academically and in their wellbeing. Alongside our direct work, REUK provides training, resources and bespoke support to education institutions across the country and carries out research to build evidence on issues related to refugee education.

Routes works on apprenticeships as part of their Routes to Employment project, supporting refugee and asylum-seeking women with accessing work in the UK

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