

“You have to work . . . but you can't!”: Contradictions of the Active Labour Market Policies for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the UK

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Abstract

The discourse of deservingness has been mobilised against certain groups in the UK society navigating UK labour markets, among them refugees and asylum seekers. These discourses, leading to the stigmatisation of the unemployed are coupled with an emphasis on the importance of individuals taking responsibility to develop their ‘employability’. Little attention has been paid to scrutinise the contrast between the deservingness rhetoric and policy making with the actual conditions newcomers, and in particular refugees and asylum seekers, are confronted with when seeking employment. Our paper fills such a gap by indicating key contradictions at the heart of labour market integration in the UK. On the one hand, the emphasis on deservingness is coupled with policy discourses that construct an environment shaped by welfare and labour market chauvinism. On the other hand, the policy architecture is fundamentally flawed in a number of ways in terms of the support mechanisms necessary to ensure that newcomers can successfully integrate into the labour market.

Keywords: newcomers; integration; UK labour market; discourse analysis

1. Introduction

The UK has for some time been portrayed as a multicultural liberal society with studies showing that the integration of migrants (including refugees and asylum seekers) compares relatively favourably with other countries across measures of social and political integration (Koopmans, 2010; Wirght and Bloemraad, 2012). The emphasis from the mid-1960s until the beginning of the 2000s has been placed on creating a ‘multicultural’ society, with different groups co-existing but retaining their independent cultural identities (Ager and Strang, 2008).

However, over recent years (see, for example, Joppke, 2004) there has been a significant shift in UK public discourses regarding nationhood and the issue of migration became a more contentious policy and public terrain (Geddes and Scholten, 2016).

This changing context paved the way for a long-term process where anti-migrant and anti-refugee discourses, legislation, and policies have dominated policy making and the media. For example, anti-migration and anti-refugee narratives were placed at the centre of the Leave campaign in the 2016 EU membership referendum (Cummings, 2017; Virdee and McGeever, 2018) and policies and legislation prioritising the control of borders instead of the integration of newcomers have been favoured, espousing narratives about the negative effects of migration on public services and perceived reductions in wages (Dennison and Geddes, 2018). Very similar tropes were developed in relation to refugees, where often a dominant feature of the narrative is contesting the legitimacy of asylum requests (Goodman and Narang, 2019) and consequently framing asylum seekers not only as an economic burden but also as potential security threats (Rudiger, 2007). Interestingly, at the same time, issues of integration became relevant again in terms of policies, or at least in terms of policy narratives as a consequence of the post-2014 increasing number of refugees. Conceptualising integration is not new: Ager and Strang (2004, 2008) developed some years ago a framework of integration that could be used to assist the policymaking process. However, integration has proven to be a blurred concept that can be used to support a range of responses, which can be more inclusive or more restrictive depending upon the policy intentions (Goodman and Kirkwood, 2019). In the past, even when integration policies remained the focus, they proved to be contradictory by concentrating on the employability of refugees as a key aspect towards their integration, while simultaneously being restrictive and negatively impacting their access to the labour market, in particular during the asylum application phase (Bloch, 2008; Mulvey, 2018). Estimates on the number of refugees who have been able to access employment within a reasonable time are still low (Strang et al., 2018). Moreover, as Mulvey (2018) argues, since the 1990s the UK Government has pursued a growing differentiation between refugees and asylum applicants, which has led to the latter facing restrictions when accessing the labour market, healthcare, education and language courses. A prime example of this has been the 1999 legislation (banning asylum seekers from working), which has had long-term effects as it contributed to the unemployment and underemployment of people once they became refugees (Bakker et al., 2016; Mulvey, 2015, 2018). Delayed access to 'training and employment opportunities can result in a loss of skills' (Bloch, 2008:22) alongside a negative impact on mental health and well-being (Campbell et al., 2018). Scholars recognise that even when asylum applicants have their requests accepted, they continue to face difficulties. In particular, the 28-day period

between the granting of leave to remain and the removal of asylum support is widely considered to be insufficient to support refugees into paid employment or to enable the receipt of welfare benefits and housing support to which refugees are entitled (Strang et al., 2018). Although between 2000 and 2014, there have been some policies implemented by the UK Government to foster the integration of refugees (see Mulvey 2018 for a detailed account), the lack of coordinated strategies, very scarce resources and the regressive strategies adopted have hindered the integration of refugees and asylum seekers.

Alongside these restrictive policies, UK Governments in previous decades have managed to recalibrate the narrative of migration from a complete rejection of migrants and refugees towards a more selective approach, one that is based on newcomers proving to be 'worthy' of their host country by being 'employable' or by proving they are 'genuine'. Such a change of discourse, based on the 'deservingness' criterion, reflects attempts to align the rhetoric on migration with a particular image of the country and its labour market needs (Sales, 2002). These discourses of deservingness are not new. In fact, in the UK, policy discourses have for some time sought to distinguish between those who are regarded as deserving of welfare support and those who are not – as in the case of the unemployed (Bagguley and Mann, 1992). Such discourses, which conjure ideas of generational 'worklessness' (Macdonald et al., 2014; Wiggan, 2012) leading to the stigmatisation of the unemployed and unemployment (Shildrick, 2018), are coupled with an emphasis on the importance of individuals taking responsibility to develop their 'employability' (Montgomery, 2020). The emphasis placed on employability assists in shifting the focus from broader societal and structural factors that may hinder individuals from finding employment to more intangible factors such as the development of appropriate attitudes and behaviours that are deemed to be attractive to potential employers (Clarke and Patrickson, 2008; Fugate et al., 2004). Therefore, the discourse of deservingness has been firmly established as one that can be mobilised against certain groups in society entering UK labour markets (see, for example, Macdonald et al., 2014; Wiggan, 2012).

However, the extent to which this has had a specific impact on newcomers and in particular refugees navigating the world of work in the UK requires much further exploration. Our study is therefore underpinned by two central research questions. First, we investigate if, after 2014, these narratives have been sustained or if discourses have instead been shaped in a different way to support the labour market integration of newcomers. Second, we seek to understand if (and eventually how) the employment support for refugees and asylum seekers has changed after 2014, and if this is more, or less, aligned with policy narratives. While scholars have investigated narratives of migration and integration, and the politics underpinning them, little attention has been paid to scrutinise the differences between the policy rhetoric and policy making with the actual

conditions refugees and asylum seekers are confronted with when seeking employment as well as interrogating the reasons behind this difference. This study fills such a gap by revealing in our findings how the employability mantra has been sustained after the refugee crisis and that it contrasts with the many barriers that policy and policy implementation do place on newcomers' pathway to employment, and particularly those most vulnerable among them: refugees and asylum seekers. Additionally, we have also developed a potential rationale behind the contrast, by discussing the very meaning of the deservingness discourse.

The paper unfolds as follows. First, we describe the methods employed in our study. Second, we analyse the narrative promoted by the UK government in terms of integration of refugees and asylum seekers in the labour market. Third, we explore the labour market activation policies through the voices of refugees, asylum seekers, civil society activists and policymakers. Finally, we compare the narrative and the labour activation policies, and we discuss key considerations that must be drawn from our findings.

2. Methodology

In this study, a realist approach has been adopted in terms of ontology (Archer, 1995) while a more interpretivist epistemology is at the heart of the study. Reality is objective and independent from human knowledge, but we must accept that our knowledge of the world is always relative to who we are and what we are doing to acquire our understandings. While ontological positivism is adopted and only one stable reality is accepted, at the epistemological level, the world is regarded as a construction built from the standpoints of individuals, thus adopting a form of epistemological interpretivism (Maxwell, 2012). We operationalised our realist approach through a mixed methods study, which involves the combination of two different methodologies: i) discourse analysis, and ii) qualitative interviews. Each of our methods is explored below in turn.

2.1 Discourse Analysis of government documents

Discourse analysis is a methodological approach that focuses upon research in the area of contemporary society, attempting to document the links between textual communication and their relation to society and social change (Lupton, 2010). Discourse analysis challenges researchers to question policy making processes, exploring how dialogue takes place, and how power relations produce dominant discourses and marginalise others (Hewitt, 2009). The complexity of discourse as a linguistic, social, political, and cultural phenomenon also characterises migration discourse, which represents a broad spectrum of different discourse genres. These genres are primarily defined by the terms of their reference – that is, what subject forms the focus of the analysis. In our case,

TABLE 1. Stakeholders and Sources

Type of stakeholders	Stakeholder sources	Type of Documents Downloaded
Executive Power	UK Government, Home Office, Department of Work and Pension, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, PM press release	Policy papers, Press Releases, Commission Reports, Publications, Consultations
Political Parties	Manifesto-Project	Political parties manifesto of 2015 and 2017 election

it is the labour market integration dimension of migration as a social and political phenomenon (van Dijk, 2018). The analysis of discourse has been crucial for exploring how newcomers are discursively constructed in the UK context particularly in the media (see, for example, Baker et al., 2008; Goodman and Kirkwood, 2019; Kirkwood, 2017). Analysis of discourse can also represent a powerful approach to explore social and political acts from policy makers (van Dijk, 2018). For such reasons, it was chosen as one of the key methodologies of our study. Our aim was to include all discourses promoted by the executives and political parties. We focused specifically on labour market integration, and we selected documents from 2014 up to 2018. Our search strategy aimed to identify all relevant discourses across different genres (e.g. press releases, policy documents, reports) in government documents. On the one hand, this involved using a combination of keywords related to refugees, asylum seekers (and synonyms), and on the other hand, labour market, employment, and employability. We utilised these keywords in the sourcing of materials from a wide variety of websites such as Home Office, Department of Work and Pension, Department for Business Innovation and Skills as well as Prime Ministerial press releases. Table 1 details the stakeholders, sources and the types of documents downloaded. To address the research questions of this paper, only documents from the UK Government and UK political parties were included.

A team of three researchers screened all documents to decide which to include for analysis. If the downloaded documents were deemed to be unrelated to labour market integration because there was no specific reference to labour market issues and employability, they were excluded. In total, 77 documents were downloaded and screened and 47 were included in the final analysis. Further details of the documents analysed are available in the Appendix/Supportive materials ([Supplementary Materials](#)).

The research team screened and thematically coded each of the documents selected for the analysis to explore narratives and framing around integration in the labour market (how do policy makers/policy actors frame issues of labour market integration), as well as enablers and barriers of integration (at meso level

as well as micro level) and their potential remedies. Extracts that explored one or all the topics above highlighted were coded. An unstructured coding guide to help identify the units of coding was shared across the researchers who formed the team across the Horizon 2020 funded project SIRIUS. However, further analysis elicited more detailed categories which were generated inductively by the research team. At the end of the analysis of each document, the team convened to discuss the coding process and findings. Any discrepancies were discussed in detail and decisions on how to proceed were made by consensus. Finally, the lead researcher undertook a second round of coding, starting from the detailed inductive generated categories, regrouping similar themes, and finalising the data extraction and analysis. In this round of the analysis, Entam's (1993) definition of the features of political and media frames was used, focusing specifically upon problem definition, problem diagnosis, moral evaluation and suggesting remedies.

2.2 Qualitative Interviews and Focus Group

Qualitative interviews can be used to provide a thick description (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) of the effectiveness of policies through understanding if they constitute barriers or facilitators according to the experiences of different stakeholders. We pursued a maximum variation sampling strategy so that different points of view were elicited and thus ensuring the inclusion of a variety of perspectives. A total of 30 interviews and two focus groups involving public sector officials (the UK and Scottish Government) ($n=4$), local authority civil servants ($n=5$ and 4 participants of a focus group), and managers of third sector organisations ($n=7$), managers of public sector agencies ($n=2$), trade unionists and academics ($n=3$), as well as refugees ($n=7$ interviews and 10 participants to the focus group), were included in our sample of interviewees. Each of the interviews and focus groups was recorded and transcribed 'intelligent verbatim'. The interview guidelines consisted of a range of 16 to 24 open-ended questions, depending on the groups of stakeholders involved¹. The confidentiality and anonymity of each of our interviewees were protected throughout the interview process. In doing so, interviewee numbers and roles (Refugees or Stakeholders) were used in detailing the quotes presented in this report. Ethical approval was requested and obtained from the SIRIUS Project Ethics board and the ethical committee of the Glasgow School of Business and Society, Glasgow Caledonian University. The interviews were transcribed by the first author of the paper, and the data were imported into the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software QSR Nvivo for the two cycles of coding. Two rounds of inductive thematic coding were used for identifying first the different policies analysed and second to group concepts (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Saldaña, 2016).

The findings of our study have been reported into two sections. Firstly, we analyse the narrative promoted by the UK Government and the UK political

parties. Secondly, we explore the effectiveness of the labour activation policies for refugees and asylum seekers.

3. You have to work!: findings from our discourse analysis

Two different narratives have been identified in our analysis of documents: “*deservingness*” and “*cost of migration*”. The concept of deservingness was academically popularised by research on general welfare attitudes, in an attempt to explicate the conditions under which – and the people with whom – citizens are prepared to share access to public welfare resources (see, for example, Kootstra, 2016; Mewes and Mau, 2013; Van Oorschot, 2000). Migrants and asylum seekers were one of the categories (alongside the unemployed) who were referred to as least deserving according to the research cited above due to factors including reciprocity (i.e. having already worked and contributed) as well as that of identity (i.e. not being native leading to low deservingness), while refugees were identified as more needy than more deserving (Van Oorschot, 2000). The second narrative, the concept of costs or burden of migration is related to the narrative that migration has a negative impact on the availability of welfare resources and affects native employment opportunities. Narratives surrounding migration as a burden discussed competition in terms of wages as well as the costs for the community in integrating migrants including refugees and asylum seekers. Both concepts and related narratives were identified in the discourse analysis as explained below. Interestingly, the diverse ethnic minorities who are arriving in the UK, as well as the distinctions between economic migrants, asylum seekers and refugees are often lost and are discussed within the same terms of reference (Goodman et al., 2017) as elaborated in the analysis of discourses below.

3.1. Deservingness

A key example of deservingness in the contemporary UK context is revealed in the 2018 White Paper, “UK’s future skillsbased immigration system” in which the then Prime Minister elaborates that the post-Brexit immigration model “*will be a system where it is workers’ skills that matter, not which country they come from. It will be a single system that welcomes talent, hard work, and the skills we need as a country*”. At the same time, the system will also remove “*incentives for migrants to remain in the UK where they have no lawful basis for doing so*”. Asylum seekers, undocumented migrants and low-skilled migrants are depicted as those who are undeserving and who are trying to ‘take advantage’ of the system. According to this narrative, those who arrive in the UK “*for the right reason*” will be welcomed and can live in “*a country in which everyone, whatever their background, can go as far as their hard work will take them*” (HM Government, 2018). An individualistic approach to labour market integration

is therefore suggested by this narrative. Again, this reflects our earlier discussion of how the discourse of employability, where the attitudes and disposition of the individual (Clarke and Patrickson, 2008; Fejes, 2010; Fugate et al., 2004) are emphasised over structural or societal barriers, helps to reinforce narratives of deservingness. Through this framing, the factors which explain a migrant's successful labour market integration depend on their ability to be hard working and contributing to the economy. This discourse was reinforced both by the statements elicited from the right-wing political party UKIP, which in its 2017 manifesto promises that future *“immigration policies will bring to Britain the brightest, the best, and those with the talents our economy most needs”* and by the Labour Party which in 2015 was among the first parties in a UK manifesto to introduce the idea of a *“controlled and fair migration system”* (Labour Party, 2015). Nevertheless, despite its frequent articulation, the conceptualisation of having a fair system (focused on border control) does little to explain the definition of fairness, a concept that has been shared by all political parties as well as by the UK Government. In this respect, the vacuum of what constitutes fairness is thus filled by discourses of deservingness. The “deservingness” frame thus enables the conceptualisation that migrants (including refugees and asylum seekers) should be divided between those who deserve to be welcomed into the UK and those who are rejected because they do not represent a *“genuine contribution”* to British society.

3.2. The cost of migration

When considering how discourse frames the labour market integration of newcomers, our analysis yielded further examples of how actors can mobilise discourses that present those arriving to be a potential cost or burden to the economy and society of the UK, rather than an opportunity.

In a speech in 2016 the Prime Minister, at that time Theresa May, while negotiating the objectives for exiting the EU, expressed that the record levels of net migration have *“put pressure on public services, like schools, stretched infrastructure, especially housing, and put a downward pressure on wages for working class people”*. Therefore, newcomers are labelled as the source of many ills in the economy and public services. The role of austerity, particularly budget cuts to local services that many working-class communities rely upon, is obscured by these narratives (O'Hara, 2015). In the UK Government white paper on Immigration (HM, 2018) although there was some recognition of the contribution of migration to the country, it is also presented as a cost that can negatively impact the willingness of businesses to train and develop the skills of local people. For example, Theresa May in the foreword of the report underlined the need for an immigration system that *“is fair to working people in the UK”* and *“that will give British business an incentive to train UK young people”*. Discourses regarding the negative effect of migration on the labour market are

further reinforced by the manifestoes of centre-right and right-wing parties in the UK. The Conservative Party, in the run up to the election of 2015, argued the importance of putting British families and people first, through more controlled and enforced migration and welfare conditions. Moreover, in both their 2015 and 2017 manifestos, UKIP claimed that “*evidence from the EU and the UK Parliament’s Treasury Select Committee reveals how immigration has driven down wages and led to job losses for British workers*”. Within these same narratives, the perceived pressure on public services and local councils were also identified by the UK Government and political parties. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government asserted that migration can “*place short-term pressures on some services and social pressures in areas where communities find it hard to integrate*” (MHLGC, 2018) while right wing political parties such as UKIP emphasised the economic pressure that migration can have on schools, the NHS and housing.

The discourses of welfare and labour market chauvinism serve to prioritise a framing of newcomers as a cost to the UK, with their role reduced to the perceived cost they bring rather than the contribution they offer.

3.3. You can't work: findings from our interviews

While the political narrative has moved towards the idea that third country nationals need to work to be considered as ‘deserving’ of their integration in the UK, in practice, existing policies construct barriers, rather than opportunities, for newcomers’ employment. The effectiveness of policies across each stage of the pathway of labour market integration is therefore explored below.

3.3.1. Education and Training Policies

In our interviews, education and training policies were identified as forms of pre-employment support. Many refugee communities “*require pre-employment support whether it is because they have a language barrier or they have confidence issues, or because they are new to the labour market and they are new to the way things work here. Or they might be poor or deprived, they are refugees, so they may have other fears and worries about their engagement*” (NGO, Interview S2).

Our interviewees widely discussed the UK language courses capacity. Almost all respondents pointed to the lack of English to Speakers of Other Languages classes in formal settings or highlighted the lengthy waiting lists and difficulties to access college courses. Our interviewees also revealed something of a postcode lottery when it comes to provision: in some areas of the country “*it is easier get into a ESOL class, in other areas is harder. There are issues around things like not arriving at the beginning of the term and waiting until the next course starts and there are issues around the [travel] distance of colleges*”

(UK Government, Interview S13). In Scotland, asylum seekers are eligible to enrol in ESOL classes while in England they are not, so “*they are very much seen as the others and when they receive the leave to remain they are completely unequipped*” (NGO, Interview S15). Respondents had different opinions concerning community classes. While some of them explained how they could be an effective solution for supporting people to learn English, others instead discussed how they were places where people could spend time in a social setting achieving “*social bridges and connections*” (Local Council, Interview S14).

The option of Modern Apprenticeships was described in interviews as particularly expensive both for employers and employees. Although highlighted as a possible solution to support refugees and asylum seekers to gain qualifications and work experience in the UK job market, “*if the person is over 25 the funding associated with the programmes falls of a cliff*” (NGO, Interview S19). Therefore, employers would prefer to hire younger modern apprentices rather than older refugees. It would also be difficult for newcomers to access the programmes because it is usually paid at the minimum wage and “*they could not afford to lose their benefits*” (NGO, Interview S15) or sustain the cost of living when they “*have responsibility such as [their] family*” (Public Funded Agency, Interview S17) with that small amount of income.

3.3.2. Recognition and Acquisition of skills and qualification

Our interviewees also discussed the issues related to the recognition and acquisition of skills and qualifications. Respondents indicated the lack of efficient mechanisms for the recognition of skills and qualifications obtained abroad as one of the main barriers to accessing the UK jobs market. The refugees and asylum seekers we spoke to acknowledged that because of the difficulties in recognising their qualifications, skills and work experience in their own country, “*it would be better [in terms of employment outcomes] for people to come and start again, from a very basic level*” (Refugee 5). According to Interviewee 3, “*when you apply for a job, you have to build the CV and most likely it has to be related to experiences inside the UK or a similar system and you need the qualification to be from the UK*” (Refugee 3). The National Agency for the Recognition and Comparison of International Qualifications and Skills (NARIC), called ENIC after Brexit², was identified during our interviews as a possible solution for recognising qualifications and could also work for some people with very specific qualifications, such as those in the medical profession, nursing and pharmacy. However, very few people decided to convert their qualifications and “*that was mostly because it’s too complex, long winded, and expensive*” (NGO, Interview S19) and sometimes not recognised at the same level of a UK qualification.

Additional difficulties were also identified for people who “*come from countries that don’t have that [piece of] paper*” (Devolved Government, Interview

S12) because of the absence of a benchmark. Often it is also difficult to understand precisely what employers want to be given, “*some employers say they need a piece of paper, others say they need someone that knows how to do the job*” (NGO, Interview S15). Acquiring qualifications has also proven to be quite challenging for refugees and asylum seekers. Our interviewees identified “*There is a lack of choice, suitable ones, for the courses that people wanted to do and there is a lack of thought about how the people that have a lack of education, can achieve the qualifications they need to move to further education*” (Local Council, Focus group).

3.3.3. Employability Programmes

The main UK Government policy that was mentioned by the interviewees in relation to employability was the ban on employment for asylum seekers. Respondents agreed that this policy had a clear, negative effect on the lives of asylum seekers because “*they lose skills, confidence to work, they lose their connections*” (Devolved Government, Interview S3) and this hindered their accessibility to the labour market once they receive refugee status. Moreover, the ban on working was also seen to contribute to the negative narrative promoted by the UK Government among others that “*they are coming here, and they don’t do anything*” (Local Council, Interview S4).

Only a few interviewees mentioned the broader employment policies of the UK Government as possible barriers or enablers of integration. Some respondents mentioned that the lack of specific employment policies for refugees was a result of awareness in government that “*to announce that there will be another x million pounds going to help the integration of refugees, it would not sound great to a lot of their voters*” (NGO, Interview S1). Others instead criticised that “*often the needs of refugees inside the labour markets are seen as completely separate to the needs of the labour market*” (Local Council, Interview S21). According to some of the interviewees “*refugees are never mentioned in top-down policies*” (Local Council, Interview S21), because they are seen by the government as a group of people who are not really part of the community.

In relation to local employability programmes, according to one of our interviewees, “*very few people have actually accessed employability services. Some of them because they don’t need to, others didn’t think it would have been sensitive on their needs*” (NGO, Interview S19). According to some of the migrants we interviewed, they never encountered any service “*tailored towards people that don’t know the basic part of the job market structure*” (Refugee 2) and often they had to figure out how to navigate the UK jobs market and how to build up a “*perfect and competitive CV*” (Refugee 7) with little or no support. Managers working in existing employability programmes recognised the importance of “*working one to one with the individual and looking at what are the*

specific things that stop that person from getting work, and how to address those things” (UK Government, Interview S13). However, these services were often provided from a wide variety of organisations and due to the lack of funding and the lack of a “*national integration service commission which can for example oversee employability programmes and identify the standard level of the services*” (NGO, Interview S15), they were often perceived as fragmented and thus fell short in terms of their accessibility to the broader population.

Interviewees highlighted the role of Job Centres to enable (or fail to enable) refugees’ integration into the labour market. Frequently mentioned was the way the work coaches “*put people [under] pressure to go away and find any kind of job*”, and often people decided not to attend because it was perceived that there was “*no dignity around that*” (Refugee 3). Some positive outcomes, mainly dependent upon the disposition of specific work coaches in terms of “*understanding that people when being resettled have specific needs*” (Devolved Government, Interview S3), were also highlighted. In some places, for example, job centre work coaches “*work with refugees for a very long time and [...] they are fairly open to ensure that those barriers are addressed*” (Local Council, Interview S4). However, this was not a consistent experience among our interviewees. In fact, according to one of our interviewees, “*if you have somebody who is empathetic and understands what you need to be doing in the first instance [...], that’s fine. If you get somebody that says you need to go and get a job I am not interested, that would be very challenging*” (Local Council, Interview S4).

The connections between services and employers were acknowledged by our interviewees as an important factor for the success of employability programmes. Employers were characterised as often being apprehensive to employ refugees partially driven by a fear of hiring someone without the right to work, and thus “*if they see a foreign name it goes to the other pile*” (NGO, Interview S15). Therefore, part of the role played by employability programmes is to develop a relationship of trust between employees and employers; in a sense almost acting as a guarantor for the individuals they send to the employers. Some of the respondents also highlighted that a lot of employers were “*desperate for good quality high skilled migrant labour and were prepared to invest in training for employees because they would see it as a very good addition to the workforce*” (UK Parliament, Interview S8).

3.3.4. *Discrimination*

When reflecting on the opportunities available to newcomers in the UK jobs market, one interviewee explained: “*migrants, refugees and asylum seekers do not have the same access to the same jobs, good jobs or jobs that match their skills*” (UK Government, Interview S11). Several of our interviewees perceived discrimination as a major barrier towards accessing the job market. Refugees, we spoke

to, often applied for several jobs but had never been contacted for an interview or in those cases when they were shortlisted found that *“at the end it doesn’t transfer to employment”* (NGO, Interview S2). Thus, only jobs in specific sectors were identified as more easily accessible, such as warehouses, retailing or hospitality, *“a lot of refugees are working in warehouses, it is zero hours contract, it is not ideal working environment, but a lot of people will do it because they will find the opportunity to work there. They are not happy, but that’s the job they can get”* (Public Funded Agency, Interview S5).

Interviewees often claimed that the government should call for action from large organisations *“to monitor their employment and workforce, which often will show the need for more representation”* (NGO, Interview S2). If the organisations could be compelled to publish data about the workforce, it would be easier to identify whether or not they are reflective of the broader population and action could be taken by policymakers. There was the perception that *“there should be more of inspection and monitoring, and government setting challenges around all of this”* (NGO, Interview S2). Another approach to tackling discrimination that was identified was the provision of training for staff in different institutions and bodies *“to make sure that they are aware of different cultures”* (NGO, Interview S18). Voluntary placements, work experience/shadowing and apprenticeships were also suggested as possible actions that employers could take to demonstrate their diversity and attract people from different backgrounds. Employers could also be incentivised to hire refugees and thus guidelines and processes could be developed *“on how to recruit a person from a refugee background, how to target and attract and how to make it more appealing to a refugee person”* (Public Funded Agency, Interview S5).

3.3.5. Exploitation

Even when they are employed, almost all our respondents perceived exploitation both in regular and irregular labour markets. Refugees and asylum seekers were identified as being embedded in the most insecure employment sectors. Zero hours contracts, precarious positions and undocumented work were consistent features of the working conditions that they were encountering. Their pathways into the labour market were often through social connections, and although some of these connections could lead to some positive outcomes, they could also *“raise the risk quite significantly that people are not getting the minimum wage, are being exploited or working illegally”* (Local Council, Interview S4). Thus, *“it became easy for refugees to become trapped in those roles”* (NGO, Interview S19). Asylum seekers were identified as those most affected by irregular labour markets; after losing their right to work *“they became more likely to be employed as undocumented workers, informally in some part of the economy, mainly hospitality and care”* (Trade Union, Interview S20). Without

the right to work, they often accept exploitative conditions simply to survive financially, while “*some employers would take them because they would take less*” (Public Funded Agency, Interview S5).

Policies designed to combat exploitation were seen as inadequate to deal with the problems that refugees, asylum seekers and more broadly third country nationals were facing. According to Interview S8, “*We have to be sure that labour market protections are there, and they are legally enforced and often they are not*”, adding that the government “*has not invested in the bodies that are meant to insure workers*” (Trade Union, Interview S20). The Immigration Acts 2014 and 2016 were also highlighted by our interviewees as particularly detrimental (and far from a solution) for people that are exploited. The risk of being deported and even being accused of criminal offences impeded people from reporting exploitative employers while similarly, it increased the fear of employers of inadvertently hiring illegal workers which consequently reduced their willingness to integrate newcomers into their organisations.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Our paper aimed at exploring the contrast between the political rhetoric concerning newcomers with the actual conditions in terms of policies and services newcomers are confronted with when seeking employment. Our findings indicate key contradictions at the heart of labour market integration in the UK. On the one hand, there is an emphasis on deservingness, coupled with policy discourses that construct an environment shaped by the cost of migration. On the other hand, the UK presents a policy architecture that is fundamentally flawed in a number of ways in terms of the support mechanisms necessary to ensure that newcomers and in particular refugees and asylum seekers can successfully integrate into the labour market.

We show that the UK Government and UK political parties after 2014 often articulated discourses regarding the labour market integration of migrants (without differentiating between migrants, refugees and asylum seekers) that emphasised the negative effects of migration and the importance of controlling the numbers (as well as the characteristics) of people arriving in the UK. This confirms previous literature which shows that only those deemed to be hard-working and arriving to make a ‘genuine’ contribution or that can be considered “genuine refugees” are deemed to be deserving, are welcomed into UK society and are allowed to pursue a path of integration (Bloch, 2008; Mulvey, 2018). Newcomers and in particular refugees but even more so, asylum seekers, find themselves navigating a political context that constructs them as both a burden and a threat. A burden in terms of perceived pressures on the welfare state and public services and a threat to the livelihoods of native workers and their living standards in relation to their wage levels or as in the case of asylum seekers even

a threat to the community. This is in line with the general emphasis placed on employability and the more intangible factors that individuals (not only newcomers but also British people) are encouraged to have to be attractive to potential employers (Fugate et al., 2004; Clarke and Patrickson, 2008; Friedli and Stearn, 2015).

If these discourses are to be taken at face value, we may therefore reasonably expect that there may be corollary policies and practices in place to ensure the smooth and swift integration of newcomers into the UK labour market. Instead, we find the contrary. Not only do policies exist which prohibit those claiming asylum from working (Mulvey, 2015); those who are entitled to work in the current policy architecture find themselves navigating a landscape of support that is fragmented, underfunded and guiding newcomers towards pathways of precarious and poorly paid work. The difficulties experienced when seeking access to language classes and vocational training alongside the lack of recognition of skills and qualifications affect newcomers prior to accessing employment. In addition, immigration policies were widely considered to be very restrictive, bureaucratic, and expensive both for newcomers and employers. The work ban experienced by asylum seekers also has a long-term negative impact on the lives of asylum seekers and refugees given that they often struggle to find employment once they have refugee status due for example to their diminished self-confidence, the gap that has emerged in their CVs during the asylum application process and the loss or outdated nature of their skills (Bakker et al., 2016). Once the migration policies are overcome, employability programs, aside from a few exceptional cases, fail to take into consideration the specific needs of refugees and asylum seekers. Moreover, the fragmentation of services across different providers and geographies as well as a lack of awareness and funding constitute a further weakness in the infrastructure of support for newcomers that reduces opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers to access these vital supports (Calò et al., 2021). Finally, anti-discrimination policies and to some extent anti-exploitation policies often do not have the necessary teeth to enforce their supposed purpose and although they could be considered as a facilitator, the lack of investment in these policies seriously restricts their potential impact.

The British reality, therefore, seems to manifest as a contradictory context where rhetoric draws upon longstanding tropes of deservingness while the on-the-ground reality mirrors welfare chauvinistic attitudes deterring any meaningful, sustainable, and long-term plan for newcomers' integration through employment. To what extent are those discourses around deservingness and employability genuine and is there a contrast between discourse and practice? To explore the gap between rhetoric and reality, there is some connection we can identify with the experience of newcomers and the experience of native workers in the UK labour market. That is a discourse of deservingness that generates an atmosphere of stigma towards those who are unemployed and a

distinction between those who are deemed to have made a genuine contribution and are thus deserving of welfare support and those who are not (Bagguley and Mann, 1992). Moreover, there is an emphasis on a ‘work first’ approach (Lindsay et al., 2007; Fuertes *et al.*, 2014), that obscures any discussion of the actual availability of good quality employment and a valorisation of any type of work, even those contractual situations that place workers and their families at risk of poverty and deepening inequalities (Macdonald et al., 2014; Smith and McBride, 2021). The same discourses aimed at native workers are thus refashioned for another group in the shape of newcomers. Doing so not only offers a device for avoiding inconvenient truths about the expansion of low paid and precarious work, policy choices to impose conditionality in welfare support and budget cuts to public services through policies of austerity but as well, in terms of newcomers, caters to voters’ nativist concerns. Thus, if the deservingness narrative is more of a dog-whistle discourse to attract specific voters, instead of addressing policy problems, the contradictions we have unearthed become clear from a strategic perspective: the rhetoric of deservingness offers a useful cloak of justification for policies that are chauvinistic in practice and underpinned by notions of identity. From this perspective, further research should focus more and foresee what factors, if they exist, would lead such policy-makers to shift towards more effective policies of labour market integration.

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Supplementary material

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279422000502>

Notes

- 1 Questions varied depending upon the stakeholders involved. Interviews with policy-makers and stakeholders included topics around strengths and weaknesses of a wide variety of policies and services to support the integration of newcomers in the labour market. Interviews with refugees were mainly focused on the life course of the refugees, their experiences with specific services, the barriers encountered when accessing the labour market and their experiences during employment (regular or irregular).
- 2 NARIC or UK ENIC is the agency that recognises and evaluates skills and qualifications of third country nationals. More information is available at: <https://www.ecctis.com/Default.aspx>

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