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The world is their oyster? The factors that help and hinder refugee-background young people in Scotland to fulfil their career potential

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Abstract

This qualitative study, based on interviews with nine participants, explores the post-secondary education and career pathways of refugee-background youth in Scotland. A key finding is that Scotland provides unique supports from state and voluntary sectors. However, these must contend with significant barriers, including academic challenges, and constrained progression from Further Education colleges to university. This exploratory study, while identifying examples of best practice, concludes that significant structural barriers continue to limit career potential for refugee-background youth.

Key words: refugee-background youth, Scotland, further and higher education, career guidance, widening participation, opportunity structure

Introduction

The world is currently witnessing the most significant displacement of refugees in modern history, with the number of forcibly displaced people surpassing 123 million at the end of 2023 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2024). While UNHCR

data does not offer a specific breakdown by age range, it can be inferred that a significant proportion of first-time asylum applicants are aged between 18 and 34, the age range most closely associated with Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) (Crosier & Kocanova, 2019).

The term refugee-background youth (RBY) encompass two distinct legal statuses. Under international law, a 'refugee' is someone who owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons such as race, religion, or political opinion is outside their country of nationality (UNHCR, 1951). An 'asylum-seeker' is seeking international protection and is awaiting a government decision on their claim (UNHCR, 2006). In the United Kingdom (UK) while adhering to this international framework, in practical terms 'refugee status' means an individual who has been granted five years 'leave to remain' (Home Office, 2023). These distinctions impact entitlements in the host country but it is important to acknowledge, regardless of legal status, that RBY are not a homogenous group and do not share a common experience (Baker et al., 2019).

For RBY, access to education is the primary mechanism through which they can rebuild their human capital, gain qualifications, and access professional pathways. Although individuals from refugee-backgrounds often demonstrate a strong motivation to pursue education (Refugee Support Network, 2012; Walker, 2011), only five per cent globally have access to tertiary education (UNHCR, 2022b). This stark gap between aspiration and attainment highlights a pressing social justice issue. In Scotland, the refugee-background student population is not officially counted. As recently as 2021, their exact numbers were unknown, making them a largely invisible group within the higher education system (Universities Scotland, 2021).

Research from England shows that barriers, such as disrupted education, insufficient language skills, financial constraints, and uncertainty about immigration status hinder progression into tertiary education (Lambrechts, 2020; Morrice & Sandri, 2018; Stevenson & Willott, 2007). These challenges are not unique to the UK and align with international studies that identify similar patterns (Arar, 2021; Baker et al., 2019; Bajwa et al., 2017). In Scotland, however, the context differs. The Scottish Government's New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy, adopts a rights-based approach that diverges with Westminster (Mulvey, 2018), and its Career Information Advice and Guidance (CIAG) service is unique in the UK. Research on refugee issues has mainly focused on policy and integration matters so it is not known how this distinct environment affects RBY aspiring to enter tertiary education. This exploratory study begins to address this gap by examining the lived experiences of RBY and the stakeholders (SH) who support them.

Following a review of the relevant literature, this article presents the study's methodology and findings, before concluding with a discussion of the implications for practice and policy.

Literature review

As the global refugee crisis continues unabated and immigration policy shifts, there is a growing body of scholarship addressing access to FE and HE for the refugee-background population. This review draws on literature across education, migration, social policy, and career guidance. While Scottish specific studies are scarce, relevant insights can be drawn from wider UK and international contexts. Within career guidance literature, there is

growing recognition that the barriers encountered by RBY are not merely individual but are embedded in structural and systemic conditions (Hooley et al., 2018; Morrice et al., 2021; Murray & Gray, 2021).

The literature makes a strong case for anchoring career guidance in social justice principles, arguing for a more explicitly emancipatory role that challenges structural inequalities. To situate the reviewed barriers and supports within a theoretical framework, this review will use Roberts' (1977) concept of 'opportunity structure'. This framework is useful for understanding how young people's educational and career trajectories are shaped not only by their personal aspirations and agency but also by the surrounding structural conditions. For RBY, these constraints are particularly pronounced, encompassing immigration policies, socio-economic disadvantage, interrupted education, loss of social capital, and inflexible institutional practices.

The Scottish post-secondary context

While the terms FE and HE will be used interchangeably in a global context, it should be noted that the Scottish post-secondary system differs from the rest of the UK in its much greater use of FE. Riddell and Blackburn (2018) note that over 20% of higher education in Scotland, primarily sub-degree programmes, occurs in colleges, compared to only about 7% in England. This means many RBY will first attend an FE college to gain qualifications, such as Higher National Certificate (HNC), and Higher National Diploma (HND), before attempting to 'articulate' or transfer to a university. While this widens initial access, it can also create a more convoluted and less certain route to a degree (Watson et al., 2020).

This review will now examine the key barriers and supports for RBY identified across the literature.

Barriers to education and career development for refugee-background young people

Education is widely recognised as holding transformative potential for RBY; however, there is a consensus among scholars that refugee-background students encounter distinct difficulties in furthering their education and face unique challenges in transitioning to university (Arar, 2021; Baker et al., 2019; Lambrechts, 2020). While other groups may experience similar disadvantage, RBY barriers do not exist in isolation but aggregate and exacerbate each other (Lambrechts, 2020). To illustrate the potential range of supports required, the barriers emerging from the literature are split into individual ones of skill and local/cultural understanding, and wider structural ones of policy, and legal issues.

Individual and structural barriers for refugee-background young people

At the individual level, RBY face several interconnected challenges that erode the capital necessary for equitable participation in FE and HE. Primary among these is language proficiency (Shakya et al., 2010; Stevenson & Willott, 2007), a barrier made more significant as available language programmes, like English as a Foreign Language (ESOL) are often inadequate preparation for university (Lambrechts, 2020; Stevenson & Baker, 2018). This linguistic deficit is further exacerbated by interrupted education, a hallmark of forced migration, that leaves many RBY with significant gaps in their learning (Arar, 2021; Stevenson & Willott, 2007).

These 'newcomer' factors compound to create significant informational barriers that make the UK's complex HE system difficult to navigate. This means that opportunities, even when they exist, can remain effectively invisible (Détourbe & Goastellec, 2018; Lambrechts, 2020). Underpinning all this are the profound challenges to mental and emotional wellbeing that can accompany forced migration (Refugee Support Network, 2012; UNICEF, 2020). The resulting loss of agency and control can lead to internalised barriers and a diminishment of the self-belief required to pursue educational goals (Bajwa et al., 2017; Magos & Margaroni, 2018).

Immigration status also impacts how RBY access educational opportunities and is highlighted throughout the literature. In the UK, a two-tier system exists where asylum seekers are classified as 'international' students and are not eligible to access statutory funding (Karyotis et al., 2021; Lambrechts, 2020). Even for those with recognised refugee status, the UK system has replaced the automatic right to remain with permission to stay for 5 years, with no guarantee of remaining long-term. This creates uncertainty for both RBY and institutions, and narrows the range of what RBY can perceive as attainable (Gladwell et al., 2021). This precarity has worsened due to the UK government's 'hostile environment' policy, reflected in legislation such as the Nationality and Borders Act (2022).

Scotland's divergence is notable here. While the New Scots strategy does not set rules for the asylum process, the government is using its powers to facilitate integration through education (Scottish Government, 2018). RBY in the asylum process in Scotland are eligible for part-time FE courses and ESOL at no cost. This said, the limited availability of part-time programmes restricts the range of educational pathways open to them.

The legal framework around immigration status results in socio-economic disadvantage as government policy creates insurmountable financial hurdles for asylum seekers, who as well as being subject to international tuition fees are also restricted from employment (Lambrechts, 2020). An additional financial barrier arises at the institutional level through inflexible processes. For example, the requirement for expensive English language proficiency tests, such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), was found to be prohibitive for many, creating a financial barrier in addition to a linguistic one (Morrice & Sandri, 2018).

Supporting factors for refugee-background young people

While the barriers facing RBY are significant, the literature also highlights a range of interventions designed to help them navigate unfamiliar educational systems, make informed choices, and develop a sense of agency. These include targeted support, advocacy, and systemic interventions like Widening Participation (WP) and scholarship programmes, all of which are underpinned by the critical role of career guidance.

The literature is clear that the intersection of interrupted education, language barriers, and precarious immigration status creates a state of 'super-disadvantage' (Lambrechts, 2020, p. 804). This means generic provision is often insufficient, and that targeted, holistic support that understands these unique, overlapping challenges is crucial for enabling RBY to access education (Arar, 2021; Baker et al., 2019).

Provision across the UK illustrates contrasting approaches. In England, support can be ad hoc and refugees are not formally recognised as a distinct group within national higher

education policy (Crosier & Kocanova, 2019). By contrast, Scotland has pursued a more coordinated strategy, evidenced by good practice at the institutional level. A key example is the collaboration between Universities Scotland and the Scottish Refugee Council to produce guidance for admissions staff on issues like documentation and entitlements (Universities Scotland, 2021). However, Ramsay and Baker (2019) caution that such support must be sustained throughout the transition into tertiary education to be truly effective, and should not be confined to the application stage.

The literature further underlines that access to education cannot be isolated from wider social and economic conditions, as RBY are not able to prioritise education when basic needs like housing are insecure (Doyle & O'Toole, 2013; Gately, 2015). This is an area where the New Scots strategy, by adopting a holistic model, has again created a marked divergence within the UK. Comparative research underscores this distinction, showing that young Syrian refugees in Scotland report higher levels of state support and better living conditions than their counterparts in England (Karyotis et al., 2018).

A growing range of initiatives are now aimed at broadening participation in HE, including outreach programmes and partnerships with community groups to support disadvantaged populations, such as RBY (Détourbe & Goastellec, 2018; Dunwoodie et al., 2020; McKenzie et al., 2019). Despite these positive developments, scholars argue there is significant room to enhance the impact of WP initiatives. Stronger collaboration with third-sector organisations, more inclusive outreach, and direct engagement with RBY themselves are recommended to ensure programmes reflect lived experience (Lambrechts, 2020). Practical measures such as cross-departmental coordination of English language provision and financial support (Lenette, 2016) or culturally sensitive peer mentoring (Bajwa et al., 2017) are also identified.

A growing number of UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) now offer scholarship support, with Murray (2022) identifying 72 university-led initiatives during the period 2008 to 2018. These 'sanctuary scholarships' aim to mitigate the financial barriers faced by forced migrants, who are often classified as international students and therefore excluded from access to mainstream student finance. While such initiatives demonstrate a clear commitment from HEIs and open routes for individuals, Murray argues they do not dismantle the structural barriers that produce the problem in the first place.

Career guidance is recognised as a crucial supporting factor, however, the literature highlights that engaging with diverse groups, such as RBY, introduces complexity to guidance provision (Sultana, 2022). In a related point, Vehviläinen and Souto (2021) contend practitioners tend to avoid discussing important aspects of the lives of their refugee clients if they themselves are confused or deterred from digging too deeply by perceptions of social insensitivity.

A key challenge is that many conventional career guidance models rest on assumptions of high personal agency that do not fit the lived realities of RBY. For example, a concept like Bandura's (1977) notion of self-efficacy - a belief in one's ability to exercise control over life events - is central to many theories. However, for an RBY in the asylum process who must wait for the Home Office to decide their future, the personal agency required to develop self-efficacy is severely stifled. This aligns with a social justice critique which argues that true inequality arises not from the choices people make, but from their fundamental ability to make choices in the first place (Kabeer, 1999).

To be effective, scholars argue that guidance for RBY requires a shift from individualistic to social justice frameworks, which prioritise contextual issues (Abkhezr et al., 2015; Hooley et al., 2019). This reframing positions practitioners not just as advisors, but as potential advocates for systemic change, working across multiple levels to influence both individual outcomes and the institutional structures that shape them (Hooley et al., 2019). The necessity of this advocacy is powerfully illustrated by Murray's (2022) critique of sanctuary scholarships. This critique suggests that by focusing on individual forms of rescue, practitioners can inadvertently reinforce the idea that education is a conditional gift rather than a right, leaving the underlying unjust structures unchallenged.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative, exploratory design to investigate the perceived factors that hinder and support RBY in accessing post-secondary educational pathways in Scotland, an area with little specific research.

The research adopted a social constructivist approach, which holds that knowledge is produced through sense making and meaning in social contexts rather than through objective measurement (Jackson, 2013, p. 54). This perspective was therefore chosen to prioritise participants' lived experiences and subjective viewpoints, which directly informed the use of semi-structured interviews.

A purposive sampling approach was used to recruit a sample of nine participants. This comprised five RBY and four SH from key support organisations in Glasgow and Edinburgh. RBY participants were aged 18-24, resident in Scotland for 1-5 years, and either currently enrolled in FE or aspiring to enter HE. To facilitate recruitment, the researcher contacted intermediary organisations, including state and voluntary agencies, as well as FE colleges and universities, to request introductions to potential participants. A specific criterion was that RBY participants needed a good command of English, as a translation service was not used. The potential for this gatekeeper-led approach to introduce selection bias is acknowledged and will be discussed further in the Limitations section.

The semi-structured interviews, conducted both face-to-face and online, used a mix of open-ended questions and prompts. As a safeguarding measure, a stakeholder remained present but non-participating during three of the online interviews with RBY. To ensure transparency in the presentation of findings, participants are identified as RBY, SH or RBY-SHP (Stakeholder Present).

The study employed reflexive thematic analysis, following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 6). An inductive approach was taken, meaning that themes were developed directly from the participants' accounts. Visual mapping was a critical part of this analytical process as it helped to identify underlying patterns between codes and refine the final themes.

Limitations of the research

This study has several limitations that should be noted. The modest sample size means the findings are not generalisable. This is compounded by the potential for selection bias introduced by the gatekeeper-led recruitment method. As intermediary organisations identified participants already engaged with support services, the sample may have been more motivated, and their accounts more positive, than the wider RBY population.

Furthermore, the sample's scope was limited geographically to Scotland's central belt and linguistically to those with a satisfactory level of English, meaning the perspectives of those living elsewhere, or who required a translator are not represented.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the University of the West of Scotland, where the researcher was an MSc student. The study followed the ethical guidelines of respect, responsibility and integrity, outlined by the University of the West of Scotland (University of the West of Scotland, 2020). Participants gave informed consent with a clear right to withdraw. To protect this vulnerable group, a person-centred and culturally sensitive approach was adopted (Clark-Kazak, 2017), and direct questions about mental health were deliberately avoided with RBY to prevent distress. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymisation, and consent was treated as an ongoing process with the researcher attentive to any signs of participant discomfort.

Findings

The thematic analysis identified two themes reflecting significant barriers: academic readiness and an uncertain future, and two on supports: being aware of opportunities and targeted support and advocacy.

Academic readiness

RBY in this study reported high educational aspirations.

It's like my childhood dream to become a doctor (Participant 7, RBY-SHP)

I hoped to become a pharmacist (Participant 1, RBY).

This was contrasted by SH participants who reported that going to HE was not typical,

I think young people who have refugee status going directly to university is probably the exception rather than the rule, most of them are going to end up in FE (Participant 9, SH).

Both RBY and stakeholder participants identified significant academic gaps in core subjects such as English and Maths, as well as general literacy barriers.

I went through UCAS, it's very difficult... they need me to talk about myself. I can't talk about myself in academic writing (Participant 6, RBY-SHP).

For reference, UCAS stands for Universities and Colleges Admissions Service and is the organisation that manages applications to HEIs in the UK (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, n.d.).

Maths was highlighted as a critical gap with limited availability of National 5 courses for those requiring a formal qualification. For reference, in Scotland, National 5s are formal qualifications taken by secondary school pupils at around age 15–16 and are the academic equivalent of General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in the English system.

Maths is an absolute nightmare, you can only do a National 5 at college [...] in Glasgow only 1 or 2 colleges do a National 5 [...] so for an asylum seeker or refugee coming in and trying to catch up and get some basic maths, it's practically impossible (Participant 2, SH)

Literacy was reported as a factor, not just in English, but for those RBY who have not had a formal education, in their native languages. This means reading and writing can be a huge barrier even for RBY with good verbal skills.

[...] they can speak brilliant English but translating that into writing essays or these kinds of things are real barriers [...] they never learned to read before so they are starting from square one in that process (Participant 3, SH)

RBY and SH noted the inadequacies of ESOL provision in preparing students for the academic language required at higher levels.

You won't study anything like maths language and science language [...] if you want to keep going to further education [...] you need physics language, chemistry language, all those words (Participant 7, RBY)

Being under-prepared academically negatively impacted confidence and, for some, a forced lowering of aspirations.

Some people don't have the confidence to do a degree. [...] I have a student who feels she didn't have the ability to cope [...] because of the writing skills and the analytical skills (Participant 2, SH)

In science, we used big words and I couldn't understand them [...]. My lecturer on that campus told me I had to leave the course and find something that suited me. This is how I ended up on a business course (Participant 1, RBY)

Mental health issues were seen as being an additional barrier to academic achievement hindering a person's ability to study.

Obviously mental health [...] we don't always talk about it but it's there in the background [...] to be dealt with first before you move on to the next stage, you are not ready (Participant 2, SH).

It should be noted that mental health was only discussed with SHs who raised the issue. For ethical reasons, the researcher did not discuss this topic with RBY.

An uncertain future

Immigration status uncertainty was consistently reported as a structural barrier to educational progression and future career planning.

When I try to apply to them (the universities) they say I haven't got my status yet [...] (Participant 6, RBY-SHP).

We had some cases where people applied to university when they had two and a half years to remain and halfway through their course their immigration status ran out [...]

When you renew your status you have to pay, it's about £1,200 [...]. How are you going to find that money? (Participant 4, SH).

The frustration of prolonged uncertainty was evident in participant narratives with both RBY and SH participants repeatedly using the words 'wait' and 'waiting'.

But they (the Home Office) said no, wait, wait, wait (Participant 6, RBY-SHP)

If you want to do a course next year and your claim gets rejected then you are not going to be able to do that [...] it's hard to think beyond this decision you are waiting for [...] what your future is going to be (Participant 3, SH).

Being aware of opportunities

The findings indicate that the RBY participants demonstrated a high degree of awareness regarding the educational pathways and opportunities available to them.

Because I am in Scotland, I have a chance to complete my education. Why not? I can do a Masters or PhD [...] (Participant 6, RBY-SHP).

At any age for the people, he can study [...] the opportunity I mean it stays (Participant 8, RBY-SHP).

Awareness of opportunities appears to be facilitated primarily through supporting organisations, including third-sector agencies and for some participants, formal career guidance provided by Skills Development Scotland (SDS, n.d.).

I did some research with SDS on courses and they helped me find the course I am doing. SDS helped a lot with everything (Participant 1, RBY)

Scotland was perceived as a place of opportunity both by RBY and SH.

Anything you want to know in Scotland you can tell to the college and they will teach you [...]. What is your dream? Just say that to them and they will work on it [...] (Participant 5, RBY).

SHs noted an increasing range of educational and training pathways available to RBY.

I think there has never been a better time [...]. There are so many courses, so many different forms of access, so many pathways [...] (Participant 9, SH)

Conversely, disciplines like medicine and law were perceived as being extremely difficult to access by both RBY and SHs. In particular, the absence of preparatory routes into these fields was viewed as a significant barrier.

The University of Glasgow they have access courses for everything [...] and the only thing which they don't have access to is medical science [...] (Participant 7, RBY-SHP).

It should be noted here that these programmes are also extremely competitive for native-born students as the number of fully-funded 'home' places is tightly controlled by the government funding agency, the Students Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS, n.d.).

Targeted support and advocacy

The findings demonstrate that tailored support and advocacy are central to RBY accessing the educational opportunities on offer in Scotland. RBY participants reported receiving assistance from a range of sources, including third-sector organisations, ESOL teachers and SDS. SHs confirmed the support provided.

The range of support that I give them is directing them to SDS if that's appropriate, X (their colleague) helps folk complete CVs, personal statements, that kind of thing. Between the pair of us we help people apply for funding for bursaries [...] point them towards HNC, HND courses [...] solve problems (Participant 9, SH).

Guardianship Scotland (formerly the Scottish Guardianship Service) was singled out for providing valuable tailored support. For reference, this service is a partnership programme between the Scottish Refugee Council and Aberlour children's charity offering one-to-one support to RBY who arrive in the country unaccompanied below the age of 18. Once enrolled, support continues indefinitely (Scottish Refugee Council, n.d.). The individual help offered by the service was highlighted by both SHs and RBY as leading to direct, positive outcomes.

I didn't have any idea, I can continue studying here like in formal education place [...]. I got a place in college as well [...]. It all happened because of the Guardianship (Participant 7, RBY-SHP).

However, the role of stakeholders extended beyond these practical processes. From the perspective of RBY, this involvement was central to fostering trust and confidence.

They (the supporting organisation) did everything for me, they are always supporting me, they are like my family (Participant 6, RBY-SHP).

This relational aspect was also evident in the warm, inclusive language used by stakeholders, with one SH consistently referring to RBY as 'our young people'. (Participant 3, SH). SH participants also highlighted how crucial tailored support is in navigating the HE system.

I have spoken to young people who have gone on to university [...] there was always a person who helped them do it [...] someone came to them and said this is the process and we can help you to do it (Participant 3, SH).

In addition to direct support, findings reflect the significance of advocacy in addressing structural barriers. SHs described cases where they intervened with FE colleges and universities.

In the past, some colleges didn't know the rules and were still applying the two-year rule to refugees [...] I had to point out to the student services this was not the case [...]. I said to that girl (the young person they were helping) the university shouldn't be saying no to you at all (Participant 2, SH)

The findings indicate evidence of targeted support from SDS, as well as interagency collaboration, demonstrated by referrals from other SHs to SDS.

[...] they could get careers interviews, career guidance, a work coach they would get that [...] (Participant 2, SH).

We have got SDS here as well. I can put in a referral to them [...]. (Participant 3- SH).

SH participants perceived Scotland as offering a more structured and supportive environment for RBY compared to the rest of the UK.

The English career service is ad hoc, not really a universal system, there is no Guardianship, that's quite unique, there is no advocacy [...]. Scotland is much more favourable for refugees (Participant 2, SH).

Discussion

This discussion analyses the findings by contextualising them within the relevant literature. Using Roberts' (1977) opportunity structure as an analytical lens, it explores the unique landscape encountered by RBY in Scotland. The analysis firstly outlines the structural constraints that hinder educational and career pathways, focusing on systemic barriers related to academic readiness and immigration status. It then examines the crucial structural enablers, showing how tailored support and access to information empowers RBY to navigate these challenges. This approach reveals a system where vital supports can help compensate for significant structural barriers.

The constraining nature of the opportunity structure

The most profound constraints identified are those that undermine both a young person's academic horizons and their future legal certainty.

The themes of 'academic readiness' and 'uncertain immigration status' illustrate the structural constraints within the Scottish opportunity structure that limit RBY pathways. Consistent with the literature (Ferede, 2010; Lambrechts, 2020) language barriers were a significant finding. However, this study adds a critical layer of nuance by identifying how the structure of provision itself creates a mismatch that fails to expand opportunity. Participants reported that ESOL provision omits the very academic and scientific language needed to access higher-level courses, meaning their potential is not being capitalized upon as the system is not tailored to their aspirations. The participants' critique of ESOL reflects a wider systemic failure identified by The Bell Foundation, whose research in England highlights the critical mismatch between ESOL focused on daily life and the need for dedicated transition programmes that teach the academic language required for FE and HE progression (The Bell Foundation, 2022). As a caveat, since this research was completed, several Scottish colleges have introduced ESOL transition courses to support access to FE and HE. This development is a positive step toward addressing the issues identified.

This study also identifies a previously overlooked structural barrier in the Scottish context: the very limited number of colleges offering maths catch-up programmes. As a foundational subject for all science-based courses, it is reasonable to argue this institutional gap actively forecloses entire career pathways, showing how the opportunity structure can be restrictive not by intention, but by omission. The way Scotland's post-secondary system is structured can also function as a constraint to university-level education. The findings suggest that RBY are channelled into the FE college system, with one SH noting that going to university

was 'the exception, rather than the rule.' This is evidenced by a report from the University of Edinburgh (Blackburn et al., 2016), who note that the access gap to universities for disadvantaged groups in Scotland is wider than in the rest of the UK, with growth in HE largely achieved through the expansion of sub-degree programmes in FE colleges. This raises important social justice implications. While appearing to widen access, this can place RBY on what Watson et al. (2020) describe as a more convoluted and less specific route to a university degree, suggesting the opportunity structure may systematically divert disadvantaged groups from elite institutions.

The most profound structural constraint, however, is an individual's immigration status, a point well-established in the literature (Murray & Gray, 2021; Gladwell, 2018; Stevenson & Willott, 2007). The UK-wide asylum system largely excludes RBY from higher education by classifying them as international students ineligible for home fees or loans. While the Scottish context offers comparatively better provision, allowing access to part-time FE college courses, this still results in a severely limited set of options, leaving individuals in a state of limbo where long-term career planning is impossible. This research found that RBY are therefore obliged to adapt their preferences to what is available, a situation described by Fedrigo et al. (2021, p. 235) as the formation of adaptive preferences where choices reflect environmental constraints rather than genuine aspirations. This imposition limits RBY's agency and demonstrates how a restrictive opportunity structure, defined by legal status, can stifle the self-determination essential for career development.

Structural enablers and unique Scottish supports

Contrasting with the systemic barriers, the findings also reveal crucial structural enablers within the Scottish context. These enablers are explored through the themes of 'Being Aware of Opportunities' and 'Targeted Support and Advocacy', which illustrate how RBY are empowered to navigate the opportunity structure.

The findings indicate that RBY participants were well-informed about the educational pathways available, allowing them to make strategic decisions and retain a sense of optimism even when their preferred choice was not immediately accessible. This finding is significant when viewed through the lens of opportunity structure, which Gately (2015) defines as including not only the choices available but, crucially, an individual's awareness of them. A lack of clear information is a well-established barrier in the literature, affecting every aspect of a refugee-background student's journey into higher education (Lambrechts, 2020). This research suggests that the informational barrier is being actively mitigated in Scotland by a network of supportive organisations. The findings show a variety of support is available from both state and voluntary agencies, a context that differs from the situation described in the rest of the UK where RBY must rely primarily on the informal voluntary sector (Doyle & O'Toole, 2013). A key finding of this study is the evidence of inter-agency partnerships steering individuals towards available opportunities. This collaborative network appears to function as a key component of the enabling opportunity structure, making the system more navigable and compensating for the 'newcomer factors' identified in the literature (Détourbe & Goastellec, 2018; Lambrechts, 2020).

The findings demonstrate that tailored, individualised support is central to RBY accessing the opportunities on offer. The importance of the relational nature of this support was illustrated by an RBY participant, who described a supporting organisation as being 'like family' and by

a SH who referred to RBY as 'our young people'. This provides a real-world example of what Ramsay and Baker (2019, p. 75) term 'warm' support offered by 'trusted people'.

The experiences of the participants demonstrate the critical role these support organisations play as mediators. For example, participant 7's ability to secure a college place was, by their own account, directly attributable to the intervention of the supporting organisation, which demonstrates how such organisations can actively open up pathways that would otherwise remain closed.

Moreover, this support often moves beyond guidance into direct advocacy. The findings show stakeholders actively intervening with universities and colleges to challenge incorrect interpretations of eligibility or funding rules. This aligns with the literature on socially just career guidance, which frames advocacy as an essential practice for working with marginalised groups (Hooley et al., 2021, Abkhezr et., 2015).

A significant finding of this study is that the structure of the support system for RBY in Scotland contains unique elements that could be considered a model of best practice. Unlike in the rest of the UK, the findings show a robust, inter-agency model that formally connects third-sector organisations with the state-run careers service, SDS. This segmented approach, as noted by Watts (2008), allows for disadvantaged groups to be specifically targeted with dedicated resources. The existence of a universal careers service specialised third-sector bodies, like Guardianship Scotland, and the evidence of formal collaboration between them constitutes a distinctive Scottish opportunity structure. While not without challenges, this integrated network functions as the most significant structural enabler for RBY, actively compensating for the systemic barriers they face.

Conclusions and implications for practice

This study reveals a key tension in the Scottish opportunity structure for RBY: unique structural enablers, such as a collaborative support network, must contend with significant structural constraints. The core relationship identified between systemic conditions and RBY agency is a powerful framework for understanding their pathways. It is important to note the context of the data collection in early 2022, a period marked by the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The subsequent arrival of large numbers of people displaced by the war in Ukraine would have exerted additional pressures on service provision in the period following this research. Despite this evolving context, the study's core findings on the structural relationship between systemic conditions and RBY agency remain relevant.

The findings give rise to some key implications for career guidance practice, most notably the need for practitioners to embrace an advocacy-based role. The research illustrates that direct advocacy is a crucial tool that can open up pathways that would otherwise remain closed. In line with a social justice approach to guidance (Hooley et al., 2021), this requires practitioners to be equipped with specific knowledge of the structural barriers RBY face, including the nuances of immigration policy and gaps in academic provision. Alongside this, the findings confirm the importance of building warm, trust-based relationships (Ramsay & Baker, 2019). In practice, fostering such relationships requires a substantial time commitment from practitioners, which may be at odds with the constraints of many service delivery models.

For policy, the findings point to two priorities. First, the unique Scottish support system, including the inter-agency model, should be recognised as best practice and protected. Second, specific structural barriers must be dismantled, including the lack of maths catch-up programmes and the convoluted pathway from FE colleges to university. Finally, this study highlights opportunities for future research. Larger quantitative studies are needed to assess if these findings are generalisable. Future work should broaden the sample to include RBY in rural areas and those with lower levels of English proficiency, while longitudinal research is needed to track long-term career outcomes and inform the evolution of socially just career guidance practice.



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